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A CLAYTON MAGAZINE

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A Novel of Romance and Battle

By AMOS MOORE

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Third July Number

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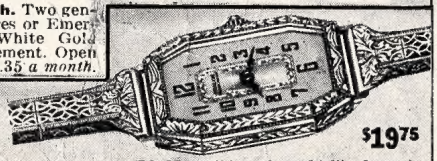

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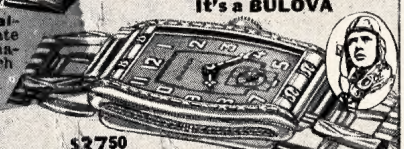

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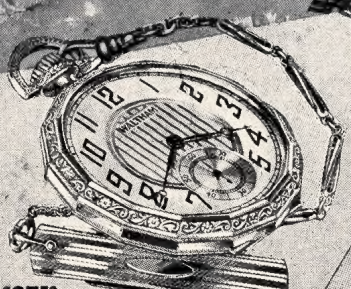

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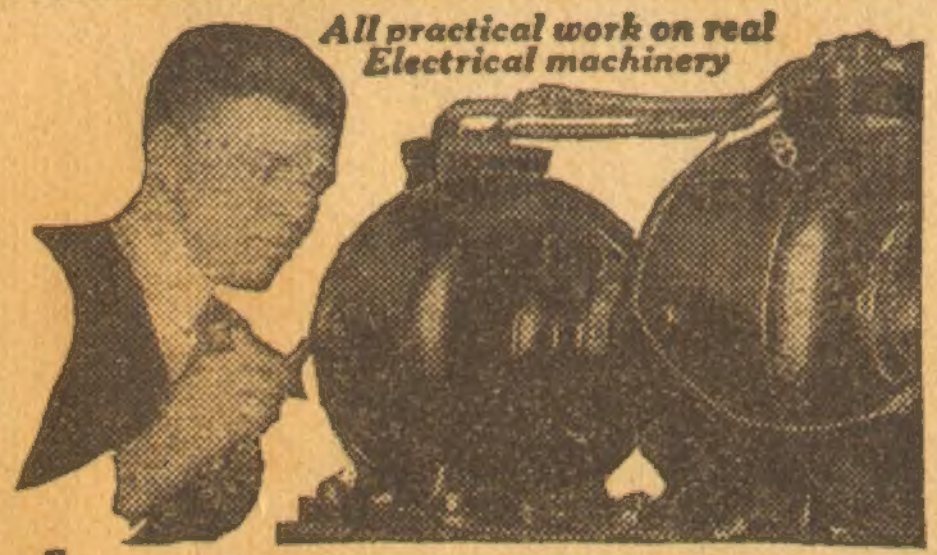

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This Issue Dated July 31, 1931

Entered as second-class matter on October 10, 1924, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered as a Trade-mark in the U. S. Patent Office.

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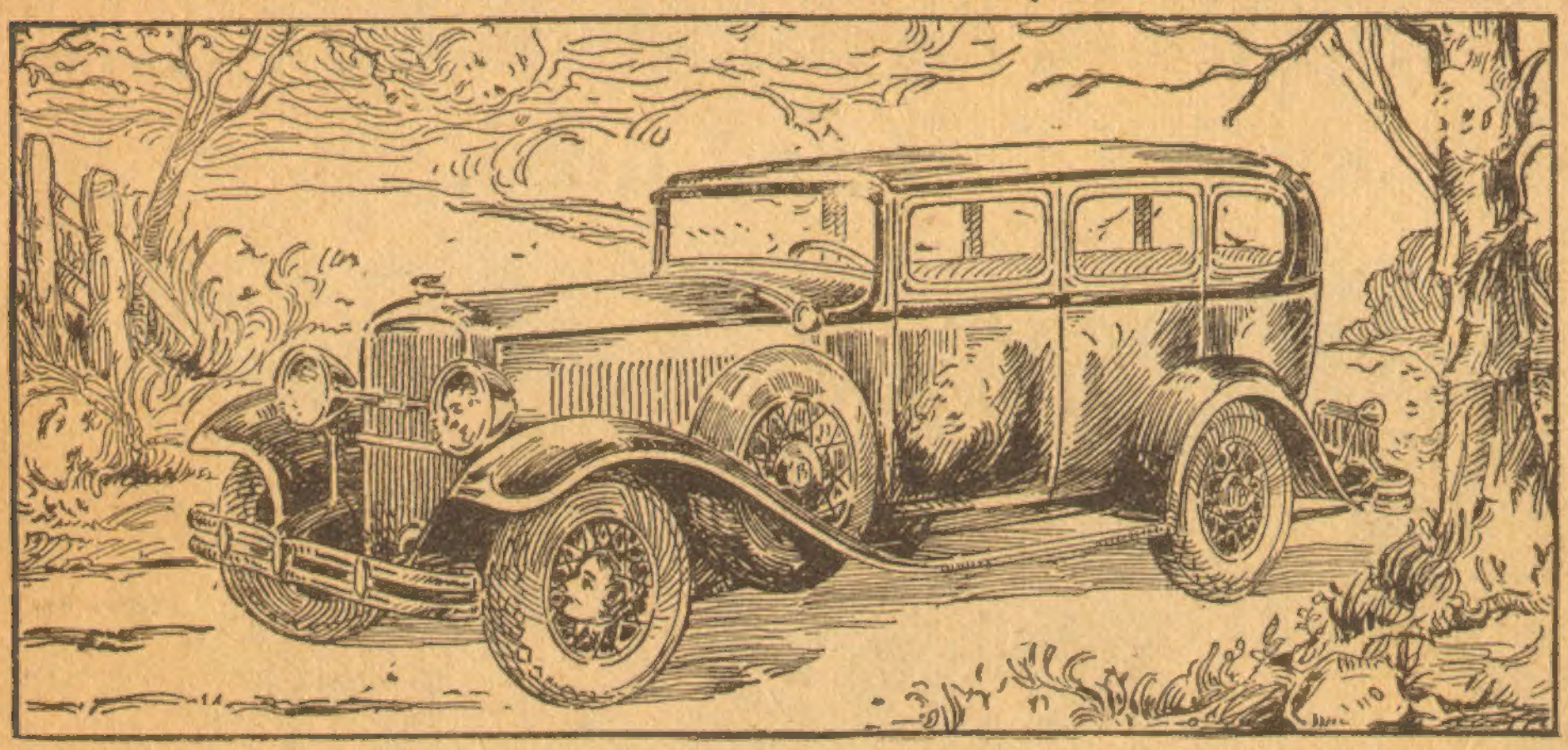

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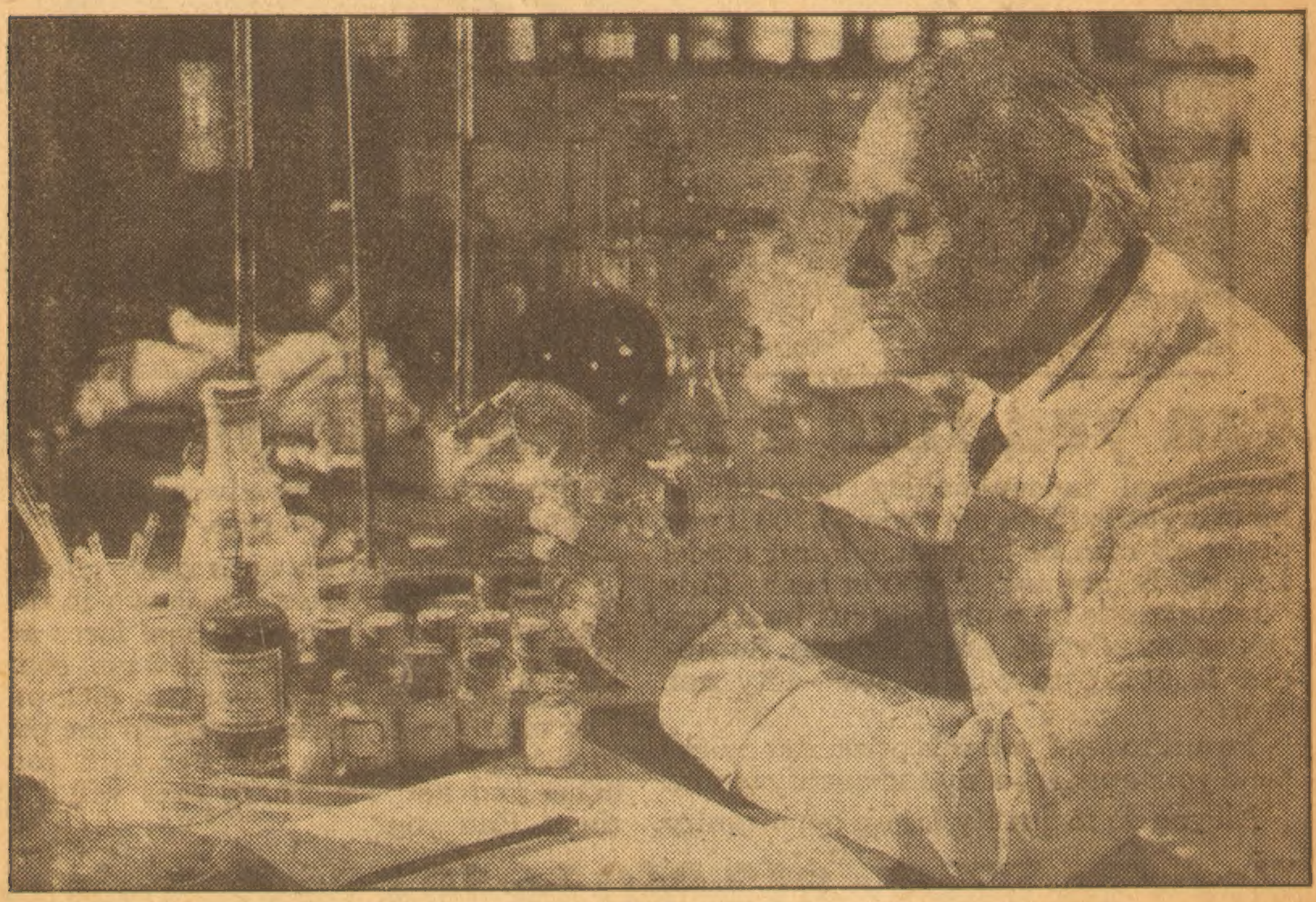

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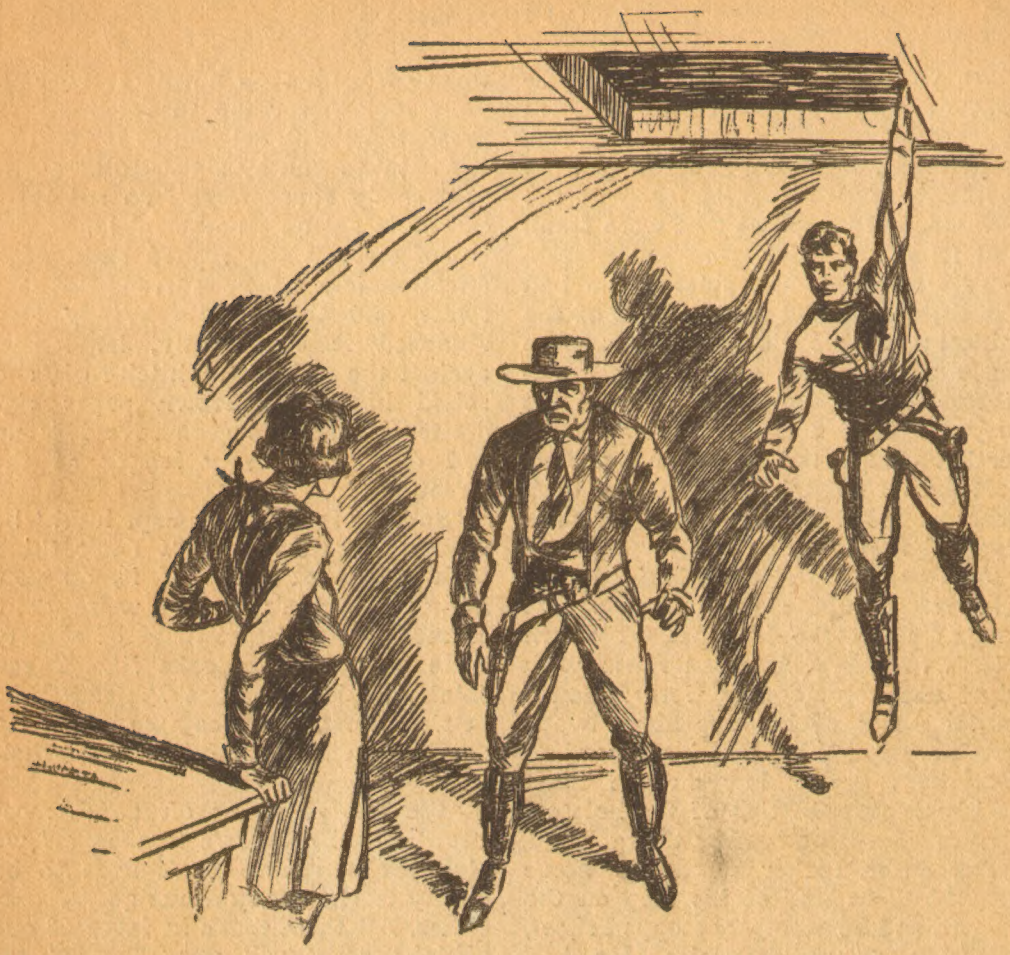

The Ruckus at Roaring Gap

By Amos Moore

She feared for this man who slapped Death in the face and laughed. But when the fierce, passionate drama of two intrepid fighters who were enemies for love of her, was over, she knew that she need never fear again while Jim rode by her side. And he knew that the sweetest girl in seven counties was his forever, and his alone.

CHAPTER I

The Chestnut Stallion

PULLING his old, broad-brimmed Stetson down over his eyes to shield them from the slanting shafts of the mid-afternoon sun, Jim Lorimer stepped out through the low doorway of Bill's Big Eats into the hot, bright glare of Roaring Gap's main and only street.

He had just disposed of a double portion of steak with fried potatoes, two large wedges of soggy peach pie, and three cups of a dark brown infusion labeled, and almost recognizable as, coffee. So he was at peace with himself and all the world.

Whistling a plaintive little refrain, he sauntered across the wooden sidewalk, toward a handsome chestnut stallion with long cream-colored mane and tail. The animal was drowsing in the strip of doubtful shade cast by the high false front of the Paramount Pool Palace near the corner.

He was a good-looking young fellow, of perhaps twenty-four or -five years of age, with crisp, thick, wavy, brown hair. He had a generously wide mouth whimsically up-quirked at the corners, and blue eyes that were frank and friendly.

Tall and broad-shouldered, he had the slim waist and narrow hips of the athlete; but all his movements were made with a sort of slow, easy deliberation that was suggestive of the lazy grace of a cat. He wore brown leather chaps and vest, and a fine, soft brown flannel shirt, with a dark crimson silk handkerchief square-knotted about the neck.

A strand of intricately braided gold wire of exquisite workmanship was looped about the high-peaked crown of his sombrero. Mexican spurs, with big blunt silver rowels were fastened to the heels of his expensive boots. From crossed belts, two ivory-handled forty-fives swung low on the front of his thighs, the tips of the holsters tied down with a leather thong.

An eager nicker from his horse greeted the sound of his step on the boards, and he promptly stopped short, affecting grieved surprise. He had been through the same scene hundreds of times, but it never lost its savor and he never failed to play up.

"Now, what's all that for?" he wanted to know plaintively. "Yuh had yuhr dinner before I knew whether I was goin' to get any or not, didn't yuh? An' yuh had a drink an' a nice rest, besides. Well, then, what's the big idea of makin' noises at me?"

The chestnut nickered again softly, rubbed a coaxingly persuasive nose up and down against his sleeve.

"Oh, all right, all right, if yuh're goin' to bust out cryin' about it!" Lorimer said in a tone of strained resignation; and opened his hand to display the lump of sugar he had been carrying concealed in the palm.

"I reckon I got to humor yuh, only yuh sure are gettin' awful greedy in yuhr old age, Windy, hawss. It's gettin' so I can't stop nowheres without yuhr lookin' for me to fetch yuh a present. An' yuh act just as if yuh had it comin' to yuh by rights—like a girl at a candy counter, yuh do so! Here—take it an' quit botherin' me."

Jim stroked the arched satin neck affectionately as he surrendered the sweet, and then, while Windy Day munched it contentedly, he leaned against the rail of the hitch-rack, and rolled himself a brown paper cigarette. He let his gaze rove idly up and down the dusty length of the street.

"So this is Roaring Gap, huh?" he remarked, half aloud. "I don't think such a hell of a lot of it, do you, Windy? I don't reckon we're goin' to settle down here! Kind of a dirty little badger hole, looks like. I can think of plenty places I'd rather be in right now. What say we fog along until we run across one of 'em, shall we?

"We can pinch us off a job most anywheres, I wouldn't wonder, an' we ain't broke, so we don't have to be in any tearin' hurry about gettin' one, either. All them that's in favor of our hittin' the out-trail, say 'I'. . . . That makes it unanimous. Let's go, old-timer."

At this moment of decision, a rapidly moving cloud of dust approaching from the upper end of the street, resolved itself into a quartette of horsemen, riding at full gallop. They were pretty rough-looking customers, conspicuously attired in concha-studded chaps and gaudily braided vests, and all of them had apparently been drinking rather too freely. The foremost, forking a big rangy bay, whose flanks had been recently and cruelly spur-raked, was a thick-set, chunky individual. His hands and feet were enormous and he had a puffily bloated red face.

Just now this person was roaring out the chorus of a ribald dance hall song, to the evident vast enjoyment of himself as well as his companions,

and was beating time by flicking the lash of his quirt under the belly of his sweating horse, first on one side and then on the other.

As he came abreast of the hitch-rack, he caught sight of Windy Day, showy and handsome, a thoroughbred from soft velvet muzzle to slender-hocked hoofs, and checked his song with the rawhide quirt poised in mid-air. A second glance, and he had brought the bay to a stop with an abrupt yank on the reins that sent the animal back on its haunches. Then he dragged its frothing lower jaw open until it almost touched the animal's chest, which was flecked with red-tinged foam.

Dismounting, he swaggered across the street, amid much jingling of spur chains and danglers. His three companions, after a moment's hesitation, followed at his heels. As he approached the hitch-rack, he bobbed his head in salute.

But Jim Lorimer's face was quite impassive, nor did he move from his lounging position against the rail. He nodded shortly in response to the man's bluff "Howdy, stranger. New to Roarin' Gap, ain't yuh?" and moistened his cigarette paper.

A slow, cold anger was stirring within him. That bay didn't need a ring bit any more than a calf needed two tails, and from the bloody froth around the beast's jaw, it was ten to one that the spade on the bit was notched.

"This here ain't a bad-lookin' cayuse yuh rid in on," the man was continuing, surveying Windy Day with critical condescension. "Little narrer in the chest, mebbe, an' a mite long in the barrel, but he ain't bad. Quite a lot of hair he's got for one hoss. I'll trade my bay for him, if yuh're agreeable."

Lorimer shook his head.

"No, thanks," he said, briefly. "I'll keep what I've got."

Although he had never been in Roaring Gap before, he had heard of the town, and he was wondering if the four before him were to be considered as representative citizens. If so, it was not particularly surprising that the place had acquired a reputation that seemed out of all proportion to its size and importance in the county.

"I wouldn't say no too hasty-like, stranger," the puffy-faced one went on. "That bay o' mine, now, he's one fine animal. Ain't nothin' with four legs can head him, an' he'll stay with the best of 'em, too. But I've sort of took a fancy to this feller. I reckon he'd fix me up just about right."

Jim Lorimer scratched a match on the leg of his chaps and applied the small, sputtering flame to his cigarette.

"Uh-huh," said he, placidly, exhaling a lungful of satisfying smoke. "I reckon he would—just about. He'd kick the everlasting daylights outa yuh first time yuh started to put that damn tool chest in his mouth."

The man's puffy red face got redder; it seemed to swell as an angry adder's hood swells. An ugly sparkle shone in his crafty little eyes.

"I'd like to see him try it!" he said loudly. "Yeah, I sure would. I'd learn him how Beef Weller handles a balky bronc! I ain't worryin' none about bein' able to gentle him if he needs it—not none, I ain't."

"He don't need it," said Lorimer.

"All right; so much the better for him. I'll give yuh the bay an' ten dollars to boot. Is it a go?"

Again the young man shook his head.

"No," he said, "it ain't. I don't want to trade him."

"Oh, yuh don't. Well, then, lemme tell yuh—"

"An' even if I did," pursued Lorimer equably, "I wouldn't make no dicker with you for him. I'd shoot him before I'd see yuh get him, or any other critter that belonged to me. Any feller that treats hawssflesh the way you do, had ought to be made to

crawl on his belly—providin' he's let to get around a-tall."

The furious blood darkened Beef Weller's face to the very roots of his hair. He took a belligerent step forward.

"Say, looka here, young feller," he rasped, "yuh're too almighty damn fresh for yuhr own good, sabe? We ain't got no use for yuhr kind in Roarin' Gap!"

"No?" shrugged Lorimer. "Well, that's all right with me, 'cause I wasn't aimin' to stay here. Windy Day an' me, we're driftin' right along on through." Leisurely, he straightened up, put out his hand to take the stallion's bridle.

"Hold on, there!" exclaimed one of the other men, shouldering forward to the side of Weller, over whom he towered head and shoulders. Loose-jointed and thin to the point of emaciation, he was several inches over six feet in height. His grotesquely small head, bald and almost perfectly round, reminded one of nothing so much as the knob on the top of a clothes-post. Between him and another of the quartette, whose greasy black hair straggled in matted locks over his ears and who had a pronounced cast in the left eye, Lorimer had seen a slyly furtive wink pass.

"Hold on, there!" he repeated, his voice raised. "Before yuh go, stranger, we'd like to have yuh tell us how yuh come by that hoss! Where'd yuh get him?"

"Bred an' raised him—if it's any of yuhr business," returned Lorimer curtly. "An' he don't like folks foolin' around too close to him, so yuh best clear away from his heels."

"Oh, yeah? He says he bred an' raised him, Beef!" the other snickered. "That's a good one, ain't it? You, Three-Spot"—to the fourth member of the group, who had so far kept more or less in the background—"just haze yuhrself up to Frank McMahon's office an' tell him we'd like to have him sashay down here pronto. Tell him Beef Weller an' Squint Bishop an' me 'ud like to see him."

The man addressed as Three-Spot looked at Weller as if for confirmation of the order, and the latter nodded.

"Yeah, do like Shorty says, Three-Spot, an' rattle yuhr spurs. An' you, Mister Hoss-Breeder"—turning back to Jim Lorimer with a scowl—"just yuh stay right where yuh are until the sheriff gets here. Understand?"

Jim Lorimer did understand him, rather better than Beef Weller knew. He had met loud-mouthed bullies of Beef's particular type before, and he had already begun to suspect that he was in for trouble—though not with the sheriff. But while trouble was something that he never hunted, he had never yet seriously exerted himself to go out of his way to avoid it when he saw it headed his way.

The good-natured little half-smile that was characteristic of him did not leave his face as he drawled lazily:

"Sure I heard yuh—bein' in the same county an' wearin' my ears. But why for should I hang around here waitin' for the sheriff? He don't want to see me for anything."

"Mebbe so he don't," the man with the cast in his eye—Squint Bishop—put in; "an' then, again, it might just happen that he does, huh, Shorty?"

"Yeah, it might," smirked the lanky individual. "They's a hell of a sight stranger things than that has happened before, right here in Roarin' Gap, an' Frank McMahon will tell yuh so hisself. He'll be here pronto.

"I call to mind how once a breed from Tres Rios claimed he'd bought that blaze-faced roan Frank used to ride—only Frank, he hadn't never sold it."

CHAPTER II

Who's a Horse Thief?

JIM LORIMER had let go of Windy Day's bridle and resumed his comfortable slouching position against the

rail of the hitch-rack. And he still looked as amiable as ever, but anyone who had been watching his eyes might have noticed that an odd, frosty glitter had come into their clear blue depths.

A single glance had enabled him to dismiss from consideration the rest of the crowd that had gathered, with the exception of the three men of the original four who had accosted him. These three, he looked over appraisingly from head to foot.

"You arrange with the sheriff to carry yuhr specs for yuh?" he inquired politely of Weller. "'Cause if that's why yuh want him to come down here, it ain't nowise necessary to disturb him. Any of these gents here'll tell yuh that my hawss ain't branded. I'd 've been glad to do it myself, if I'd known you an' yuhr pals was all sufferin' from eye trouble."

Beef Weller glowered at him.

"We ain't none of us sufferin' from it so much that we can't see what this hoss looked like, feller!" he growled.

"I s'pose yuh wouldn't want to tell me just what he *does* look like to you, would yuh?" Lorimer suggested gently.

"I dunno why not. Though"—with a nasty sneer—"I'd be willin' to bet my saddle yuh know all about it without bein' told. He looks to me like a hoss that was stole from the Long Diamond outfit 'long about five-six weeks ago, that's what he looks like, hombre! See?"

"Oh! That's what he looks like!" Lorimer appeared to meditate for a moment over this piece of information. "I see. Yuh wasn't, however, meanin' to insinuate that I didn't come by him honestly, was yuh, Mister Weller?"

Weller spat into the dust.

"I dunno how yuh come by him," he snapped. "All I know is that he was stole."

"An' that's a plenty, I'd say!" Shorty Barnes chimed in. "That's about all anybody needs to know to start on; they can likely figure out the balance without tirin' their brains!"

He had moved a little away from Weller, a little closer to the edge of the wooden sidewalk, so that he was now on the left of the owner of Windy Day, and separated from him by perhaps ten or a dozen feet. Squint Bishop had sidled off toward the right. The result of their joint maneuver was that one of them was on each side of Lorimer. Beef Weller was in the road, directly in front of him.

The move was not lost on the crowd, which scattered abruptly, several of its members suddenly remembering that they had pressing business elsewhere and hurrying off to attend to it.

But Jim Lorimer seemed to be quite unaware of the significance attaching to their departure, and if he realized that he was in the center of a menacingly hostile semicircle, he gave no sign. Still lounging easily against the hitch-rack, he appeared not to hear Shorty's interpolation, but continued to address himself to Beef Weller.

"I wouldn't doubt that there was *a* hawss stole from the Long Diamond, if yuh say so, Mister Weller," he said, "but what makes yuh think this is him?"

"Think? I told yuh I knowed it!" snarled Beef. "I recognized the critter the minute I set eyes on him."

"An' yuh knew for sure he was stolen?"

"O' course! What d'yuh take me for, anyways, feller?"

"Well," Lorimer drawled lazily, "seein' yuh was certain sure that this hawss was stole, minute yuh set eyes on him, an' then done yuhr dangdest to trade yuhr bay for him, I'd say"—the eyes that were staring steadily into Beef Weller's had chilled and hardened—"that yuh were either a hawss thief, or else just a fool an' a plain damn liar!"

The effect of that speech was electrical. With a furious oath, Beef Weller went for his gun, but he never

even touched it. One of Lorimer's big ivory-handled forty-fives spat out a stream of fire, and the red-faced bully toppled over at full length in the dust, screaming and writhing with the agony of a shattered shoulder.

At the same instant, Lorimer leaped backward. His right arm flicked across his chest, swift as a snapping whip-lash. There was a flash, a roar, and Shorty Barnes' long body jackknifed convulsively, and sprawled face downward across the wooden sidewalk.

The gun which Shorty had been in the very act of discharging into Lorimer's back, flew from his hand, to crash through the glass window pane of the Paramount Pool Palace. The bullet whizzed in through the open doorway of Bill's Big Eats and played havoc with a stack of dishes piled on the counter at the rear of the room.

"Stick 'em up, Bishop! Quick—I've got yuh covered!" the order rapped out; and Squint Bishop obeyed as promptly as he could for the paralyzing bewilderment and dismay that gripped him at the terrible swiftness with which his two confederates had been put out of action. The stranger, whom they had nearly surrounded, and who should have fallen the easiest of easy victims, had a smoking gun in each hand. The left, the one with which he had dropped Beef Weller, was now pointing directly at the terrified Squint himself.

The right, which had accounted for Shorty, was swinging in a short, slow arc that covered a drunken cowboy, Three-Spot, and a stern-faced, powerfully built man who had just ridden up.

"Jest drop them guns, stranger!" shouted the big man with Three-Spot; but although Jim Lorimer knew that it must be the sheriff, he holstered only one gun, keeping Squint Bishop cowering before the other until he could reach out and jerk the fellow's own weapon from its scabbard. He tossed it into the middle of the road, and with a deft flirt of his boot toe, sent Weller's gun after it. Then he turned to Sheriff McMahon.

"I'm mighty sorry, Sheriff," he said. "I know this is a hell of a way to dirty up yuhr main street; but if yuh was where I think yuh were when Beef Weller opened the pot, mebbe yuh saw how I had to call his play. An' with both his pals raisin', I reckon it was a dang good thing for me that I happened to have a ace in the hole!"

"Looked to me kinda as if yuh had two aces in the hole," remarked the sheriff dryly. He dismounted and bent over the unsightly body of Shorty Barnes, noting how Jim's shot had pierced the heart through and through. Then he strode over to the groaning Weller, from whose smashed shoulder the blood was pouring in a steady bright scarlet stream.

McMahon's crisp directions met with a prompt response from the crowd which, augmented in numbers, had now gathered again as rapidly as it had disappeared when the ruckus started.

In a very short space of time, Weller's wound had been fairly well staunched, and he had been moved into the Paramount Pool Palace, there to be laid on one of the tables to await the arrival of the doctor. Shorty Barnes' body had been removed, and Three-Spot and Squint Bishop, attempting to slip quietly away in the confusion, had been peremptorily ordered to wait until they were told they might go. Then the sheriff, waving back the curious crowd that surged about him, beckoned Jim Lorimer aside.

"Now, young feller," he said, "we'll hear what yuh've got to say for yuhrself. We'll save time if I tell yuh I saw the whole thing, an' I know yuh shot in self-defense. Shorty Barnes was fixin' to put a window in yuhr back, whiles yuh were havin' it out with Beef Weller, who started the muss. I saw him go for his gun be-

fore yuh dug for yuhrs. An' while I'm on the subject of guns, I'll just mention in passin' that I never saw a quicker draw than yuh made. But I couldn't hear what yuh said to Beef to touch him off. What did yuh tell him?"

"Told him his right name," responded Lorimer with a cheerful grin. "Mine, by the way, is Lorimer, in case yuh want to know it, Sheriff. Weller claimed my hawss had been stole from the Long Diamond, but, before that, he tried to make me trade. What made him so mad was my givin' him my own version of that old sayin' about the receiver bein' as bad as the thief. He didn't seem to care about it much.

"O' course," Lorimer added, "I didn't steal that hawss, Sheriff, an' I didn't expect to have no trouble provin' I hadn't. But that jasper I plugged in the shoulder seemed to want him kind o' bad; an' it looked to me like he was ready to go quite a long ways to get him—even to havin' me fitted for a rope necktie."

"Beef's pretty much like all the rest of the bunch he trails with," remarked the sheriff. "They ain't none of 'em any too damn particular about how far they go—nor what they do when they get there." He glanced from Lorimer to Windy Day at the hitch-rack and back again. "Just how," he inquired pointedly, "was yuh aimin' to prove there was no truth in the charge that that there stallion wasn't yuhrs, Lorimer?"

CHAPTER III

Ordered Out!

FOR answer, Jim Lorimer pursed his lips in a low, peculiar whistle. Instantly, Windy Day wheeled away from the hitch-rack and cantered over to him.

"How about givin' somebody a little tickle in the ribs, old-timer?" he asked; and, like a flash, the chestnut lashed out with savage hind hoofs.

"I reckon that's the proper answer, all right, Windy. An' now, I s'pose yuh're lookin' for sugar candy?"

Windy nickered; the handsome head with its splendid flowing mane was lowered and raised three times.

"Or would yuh just as soon have iron candy, mebbe?"

The sheriff could detect no difference in the tone in which the question was asked; but either the thoroughbred could or he knew the words. He shook his head until the bridle chains clanked and chimed.

"Oh! So yuh don't want any of that in yuhrs, huh? All right; sugar candy it'll have to be. Do yuh reckon yuh know where yuh might locate some?"

The horse stretched out his neck and rubbed his nose gently against his master's vest pocket—on the right-hand side. When Lorimer pretended to reach to the opposite pocket, he registered a vehement protest by snapping his teeth together and pawing the ground.

"He hasn't never seemed to care much for Bull or papers," Lorimer explained with a grin, showing them; and then producing a lump of sugar uncontaminated by the flavor of tobacco. "Go over by the hitch-rack whiles yuh eat it, Windy, an' lie down when yuh get there."

To the unfeigned amazement of the sheriff, the horse did exactly as he had been bidden. Lorimer laughed like a boy.

"We could keep that sort of thing up all afternoon, Mister McMahon," he said, "but what's the use? Enough is enough. Do yuh reckon anybody'd stand much chance of provin' I run that hawss off from the Long Diamond or anywheres else six weeks ago? Sheriff, I've had Windy Day ever since he was foaled, an' there ain't ary other hombre ever put a bit between his teeth or had a leg across his back."

"I'm satisfied he belongs to you, all right," the sheriff admitted. "Not that I believed for a minute he'd been stolen from the Long Diamond.

"That Long Diamond bunch," the sheriff went on, "is bad medicine, the whole blasted lot of 'em, an' they stick to a grudge closer than a tick to a steer's belly. I ain't goin' to hold yuh for killin' Shorty Barnes. If the say-so was mine, I'd move to give yuh a vote of thanks for the job—but as it is, I am goin' to ask yuh to leave town, pronto. It'll save a hell of a lot of trouble, Lorimer, an' if yuh stay around here, trouble's what we won't have anything else but. I don't want to see it."

Jim was really a little puzzled at the sheriff's attitude; inclined, too, to be somewhat contemptuous. He himself did not know what fear was, and he was surprised and disgusted at the manifestation of it in the sheriff of a county that was reputed to have produced some of the most unpleasantly notorious characters in the whole Southwest.

Jim Lorimer's brow clouded.

"Sheriff, I don't like trouble one little bit better than you do," said he; "but I ain't never taken kindly to runnin' away from it. When I can't look it in the face an' lick it, I'll go to sheep-herdin'. I've done nothin' in this town I'm ashamed of. I was mindin' my own business quiet an' peaceful as could be, when them jaspers jumped me, an' I shot because I had to."

But there was no wavering or shifting of the eyes that met his. Grave they were, but steady and unflinching. Whatever reason Sheriff Frank McMahon had in insisting that he leave Roaring Gap at once, must be entirely adequate. It was perfectly obvious, at least, that the man was no coward.

"Well, Mister McMahon, yuh've certainly treated me square; an' if yuh're really set on seein' the last of me—"

"I am, Lorimer. I told yuh I wouldn't go into it, but I'll say this much: There's more than one man been convicted on perjured testimony, right here in this county. Do yuh get me?"

Jim Lorimer nodded slowly.

"I get yuh, Sheriff," he said, "an' so me an' Windy will be siftin' along right now. I'd a dang sight rather stay an' show the rest of that bunch where they head in at, but if it's goin' to make things any easier for you, why, I'm in yuhr debt now, an' I'll be glad to oblige yuh."

CHAPTER IV

Knight Errant

HAD Jim Lorimer actually desired to remain in Roaring Gap, the sheriff's request that he leave would have had to be phrased as a direct order before he would have complied with it. But his first sight of the town had left him quite unenthusiastic. It was unusually crude and dirty and uninspiring; and, as he had confided to Windy Day, there were plenty of other places, more or less easily accessible, in which it would be pleasanter to stop.

It was, therefore, with small reluctance that Jim left the huddle of dingy buildings behind him, and rode out across the open prairie, following a deeply rutted wagon track which presently left the level and dwindled to a grass-grown trail. From here the trail pursued a leisurely way between sloping hillsides toward a line of low, undulating ridges tumbling against the far, deep blue of the horizon.

At the crest of a gentle rise, Jim came into sight of a small, shabby-looking ranch house, around which clustered a number of rather dilapidated stables and outbuildings. Beyond them stretched a wide, treeless sweep of verdant pasture land, and there was an abundance of browse on the lower slopes of the hills that marched to meet it. But not a single head of cattle was to be seen grazing, and in the railing of the larger of the two corrals, a couple of gaps showed, indicating that the enclosure had not been in use for some time.

A hen or two scratched and clucked

in the gritty yellow-white dust; a kitten sunned itself on an angle of the bunkhouse wall. Otherwise, there was no sign of life about any of the buildings, save a pair of horses, saddled and bridled, that stood sleepily switching their tails in the attenuated shade of a cottonwood tree near the veranda. Handsome animals they were, well groomed and wearing expensive trappings, in decided contrast to their poverty-stricken surroundings.

"Looks like the feller who owns that layout must've took it on the chin somehow," was Lorimer's mental comment. "There's feed enough right in the valley here to run more'n five hundred head, an' plenty of good water, too. It's a dang shame to let a nice place run down thataway, it is so."

He had ridden past the gate and some little distance beyond it, when a scream rang out through the still air; a scream high-pitched and shrill, threaded through and through with pain.

"Hell's delight, Windy! That was a woman yellin'!" Lorimer exclaimed, and without hesitation swung the stallion toward the fence. "Lift yuhr shoes, old-timer; she sounded like she needed help in a hurry!"

Easily, effortlessly, Windy Day cleared the top bar and went racing across the yard toward the front of the house. Lorimer did not wait for him to slacken speed, but flung his right leg over the saddle horn and slid diagonally to the ground in a superb running dismount. As he bounded up the veranda steps, the agonized scream rang out again, and a girl's voice broke in a quavering, half-hysterical cry:

"Stop it, you brute! Stop it, I say! Oh, oh— Stop!"

The front door was part way open. Lorimer kicked it wide, and, with drawn gun, strode within. He found himself in a long, low-ceiled room that extended the full width of the house. A row of windows at one end admitted a flood of bright afternoon sunlight that brought out in clear relief every detail of the scene in the ugly drama that was being enacted there.

In the center of the room, a frail-looking, slightly built boy, who could not have been more than twelve or thirteen years of age, was writhing in the grip of a bearded, burly ruffian of nearly thrice his size. On the floor at their feet was a gun that had evidently been wrested from the youngster's grasp. There were tears in his eyes, and he was biting his lips in a futile effort to keep back the screams of pain that were literally torn from his throat with every brutal twist that the bearded man gave his arm.

Almost directly opposite the door, another man, bull-necked, bullet-headed, with a great fleshy nose and little round, beady, black eyes, was guffawing with evil delight at the spectacle of the boy's suffering. The fingers of one of his big, dirty hands were splayed against the bosom of a pretty, golden-haired young girl, holding her pressed tight against the wall, much as a butterfly might be pinned to a card, helpless, despite her struggles to free herself.

"Reach for the roof, you hombres!" The thick dust in the yard had muffled the beat of Windy's hoofs, and the two men were so absorbed in their edifying occupation that the command that snapped out from the doorway, sharp as the ring of a hammer on steel, took them wholly by surprise. For a second, they merely stared stupidly into the cold fire of the blazing blue eyes above the leveled guns.

Twin streams of flame spouted. A roaring detonation that was half deafening in that confined space crashed out, and the ruffianly pair instinctively dodged as the heavy bullets whizzed past their heads and thudded into the farther wall.

"Reach, yuh sidewinders! Reach quick an' high, or yuh'll be in hell in a second!" Lorimer rasped savagely.

But, by this time, the two had partially recovered their scattered wits, and their hands were promptly elevated. The boy, thus released from the cruel grip of the brute who had been torturing him, sank to the floor, his shoulders shaking with great wrenching sobs which, try as he would, he could not control.

With a swift, fierce little rush, the girl was at his side, kneeling to cradle his tousled yellow head on her breast.

"Oh, Jack—Jack—"

"Don't—don't worry, sis," the youngster managed to gasp out uncertainly. "I—I'll be okay again in a minute." And, all unstrung and shaken as he was, his fingers groped about on the rug for the gun he had dropped.

"I've got it, Jack," the girl said. "It's all right, and we're all right, too, now." She released him and rose to her feet, an erect, proud little figure, dressed in worn, shabby riding clothes that could not conceal the lithe grace of her slender body.

Jim Lorimer had had only the briefest of brief glimpses of her, and he could not take his eyes from his captives to look at her now; but he was aware that she was trembling and frightened, and striving her plucky best not to show it.

He had backed the two men against the opposite wall, where they stood, sullen and surly, their hands still raised. One of them started to speak, only to be snapped off short with a curt: "Hobble yuhr yawp, feller, until yuh're asked to talk!

"Now, then, ma'am"—with a little gesture toward the girl—"I reckon it's up to me to ask yuhr pardon for makin' so free with yuhr house; but I heard somebody yellin', an' I figured I best not wait to knock. Thought I'd investigate first an' do my apologizin' afterward. I ain't wantin' to be nosey, but mebbe yuh wouldn't mind tellin' me what's the matter here?"

"The matter is that those two drunken beasts came in about fifteen minutes ago, and tried to see how offensive they could be," the girl replied quietly. "I ordered them out, and when they wouldn't go, Jack—my brother—took a hand. He had his gun, but Lafe Crosby grabbed him and made him drop it. I just couldn't do anything. I—"

"I reckon I was supposed to stand still an' let the bleatin' little calf plug me, huh?" growled the burly brute whom she had designated as Lafe Crosby. "Or mebbe kiss him when he threatened to blast a boulevard through my guts!"

"You got the gun away from him—you didn't have to keep on twisting his arm just to hear him scream!" she flashed spiritedly. "You're a coward and a cheap bully, Lafe Crosby—Both of you are! And you can't lay it to liquor, either. You're not so drunk that you didn't know perfectly well what you were doing when you came up here to insult me!" she finished angrily.

"Yuh're awful touchy, all of a sudden, seems to me," sneered Crosby. "A girl that ain't got a dollar to her name an' can't pay her debts ain't got much license to be choosey when somebody offers her a job. Say, lemme tell yuh right now, Lou Wentworth, I'm a-goin' to—"

"Yuh're a-goin' to close yuhr jaw an' keep it closed, Crosby; that's what yuh're goin' to do!" Lorimer interrupted him grimly. "Just one more word comes outa yuhr face to this young lady, an' yuh'll remember it to the longest day yuh live—which likely won't be a great while.

"I don't know where you two crawlin' varmints got the notion that yuh could insult a decent girl an' get away with it; but I'm standin' right here to tell yuh that this is the State of Texas, just in case yuh've made a mistake an' figured yuh was somewhere south of the Rio Grande!"

"It's you that's makin' the mistake, feller," rumbled Crosby's companion, "an' a damn expensive one it's goin' to be for yuh, too. I reckon yuh don't

know who I am! I'm tellin' yuh, yuh better put up that gun, an'—"

"No, I don't know who yuh are, an', what's more, I don't care," Lorimer told him coldly. "One scaly sidewinder looks pretty much the same as another, an' is just as plumb poisonous. What goes for Crosby, goes for you, too, whoever yuh are. Keep yuhr mouth shut until I tell yuh yuh can open it, yuh hear me?

"Listen, son"—to the boy, who, rather white about the lips, had gotten to his feet and was drying his eyes on the sleeve of his much-mended cotton shirt. "Go over an' pull them snakes' fangs, will yuh? One at a time, an' keep well to the side, 'cause if I have to unravel a couple of slugs in their direction, I don't want yuh to be in the way. Careful does it!"

The girl made a movement as if she would have disarmed the desperadoes herself, but checked it as she realized the motive back of the stranger's request. He had purposely asked her brother to assist him, thereby helping to wipe out some of the humiliation that the boy had suffered at Big Lafe Crosby's hands.

Jim had guessed, shrewdly enough, that to young Jack Wentworth the sharp agony of that cruelly twisted arm was now a minor thing in comparison with the knowledge that he hadn't been man enough to successfully defend his sister from insult.

"That's the stuff, Jack!" Lorimer nodded approvingly, as the boy carefully lifted the men's weapons. "That's fine. Now we're gettin' somewhere. Put them cannon over on the table where there won't be no chance of 'em goin' off by accident an' mebbe hurtin' somebody. Then step out on the porch a minute; there's something else I'd like to have yuh do for me. . . . Miss Wentworth, I'll just ask you to stay inside here until I've finished up a little job I'm aimin' to do in the yard."

The girl shot a quick, startled glance at him.

"Not—not, oh, Mister—"

"Lorimer's the name, ma'am; Jim Lorimer."

"Mister Lorimer, you don't mean you're going to—"

He smiled at her with frank reassurance.

"Ma'am, I'm goin' to learn this pair of greasy two-spots a little lesson in geography that they'd ought to have had a long while ago, that's all. Where I come from, we most generally catches 'em younger, so they don't grow up so plumb ignorant as these fellers have. But there's one thing about it: if they're learned thorough, after they've got to be beef, they ain't likely ever to forget it."

He holstered one of his guns, and, with the barrel of the other, motioned the two toward the door.

"Outside!" he said. "You first, Crosby; go down into the yard. Yuhr handsome pal can sit on the bottom step until I'm ready for him. Yuh're goin' to get individual instruction this afternoon; the same, I've heard tell, bein' the best way to impart knowledge to backward pupils. Move along, now, an' stop when yuh get to that little patch of grass."

If looks could kill, Jim Lorimer's life span would have been finished on the spot. But he paid no heed to the murderous glances of the pair, smiling cheerfully as he sauntered up to Jack Wentworth by the railing and held out his gun.

"You take this big drumstick, oldtimer," said he, "an' keep it pointin' right square at that fat hoptoad squattin' on the step. If he gets up or moves, or opens his mouth just once, drill him—an' do a good workman-like job of it, sabe? I'm relyin' on yuh to see to it he don't try to interfere whiles I'm learnin' Lafe Crosby his geography lesson."

"You can count on me, Mister Lorimer," the boy said, drawing himself up proudly. He was all aquiver with excitement and delight over the responsibility with which his strangely

made new friend was entrusting him. "I won't let you down, no siree, sir, I won't!"

"Good; I knew it!" Lorimer said, and patted his thin shoulder encouragingly before stepping down into the yard.

"What the hell's all this fool nonsense?" snarled Crosby. "What do yuh think yuh're goin' to do, anyways, feller?"

Lorimer slipped his arms out of his vest, laid the garment on the ground under a cottonwood tree, and dropped his sombrero on top of it before he answered the question.

"Do?" he then drawled coolly. "Why, I'm goin' to learn yuh Texas manners, so that next time yuh meet up with a lady, yuh'll know how to talk to her. Yuh're due to get the damndest lickin' yuh ever heard tell of, Crosby. I'm goin' to lam yuh from hell to camp-meetin! Get ready to holler!"

CHAPTER V

Lessons in Geography

EVEN as Lorimer spoke, his left arm flicked out, and his doubled fist struck squarely on Big Lafe Crosby's nose. It was not a hard nor a disabling blow, but there was a smart sting in it that brought a trickle of crimson from the wide, flaring nostrils.

With a bellow of rage, Crosby charged forward, his great fists flailing. Had either of them landed, the affray would probably have ended then and there; but with the quickness of a cat, Jim sidestepped; and as Crosby, carried along by his own momentum, plunged past him, his right fist drove with terrific force against the big fellow's jaw.

Crosby did not go down, but his knees bent under him. He staggered and shook his head to clear away the mists that swam thickly before his eyes.

"Come on, come on!" Lorimer's lazy, mocking drawl goaded him. "Take yuhr feet outa the cement, Crosby. I can't stand round here all day waitin' on yuh!"

Crosby lowered his head and rushed again, only to receive a smashing blow over one of his eyes. He screamed out a vicious curse, and struck again and again, smiting with all his tremendous strength, at the tall, brown-clad figure, which, somehow, was always mysteriously just out of reach. His eye was rapidly swelling shut; his cheek was cut. His nose was flattened and bleeding so that the drops ran down his beard. And he had not been able to land a single blow!

"Ain't so jolly to get hurt yuhrself, is it?" Lorimer taunted. "Ain't near so much fun as twistin' a kid's arm an' frightenin' a lone woman. Here, take this one an' carry it home with yuh," he added, and the thudding impact of his fist on Big Lafe's open mouth wrenched loose a couple of teeth.

Almost insane with pain and fury, Crosby spat them out; spat out, too, the blood from his lacerated lips. As strong as an ox, if he could once have gotten his huge arms wrapped around his antagonist, he could have crushed Lorimer's ribs in as easily as he could have squashed a gnat. But he was slow, unwieldy on his feet; and every attempt he made to come to close quarters brought him only fresh punishment. The younger man, panther-swift, went around him like a cooper round a barrel.

Blows rained on him—blows which he could not parry, which he could not even see, but which stung and bruised and slashed wherever they struck. Lorimer hit him absolutely at will, cutting him to pieces with scientific precision, while deliberately withholding the blow which would count the most. From the ground, the young man caught up his hat, set it at a jaunty angle on his crisp brown hair.

"Shucks, Crosby!" he drawled. "What ails yuh? Can't yuh even keep

me warm enough so's I won't ketch a cold in my head?"

But Crosby couldn't keep him from anything. He was getting groggy. His bull-like rushes weakened. He reeled blindly as he moved, virtually "out on his feet," and still the terrible, maddening tattoo of fist against flesh went on.

It was not a pretty sight to see. Nevertheless, there was about it a primitive, barbaric justice that gripped Louise Wentworth with irresistible fascination. From the doorway, she watched breathlessly, repelled by its stark ruthlessness, yet, somehow, unable to look away.

She could not, as her young brother did, actually applaud the stranger's almost uncanny skill and dexterity. But her heart beat faster as she realized that it was in her cause he had enlisted, and she followed his every move with tense admiration.

Young Jack was so excited that he could scarcely stand still. However, he had not forgotten Lorimer's admonition, and he kept the muzzle of the gun in his hand trained on Crosby's companion, who crouched on the lowest step of the veranda, his face fairly livid with rage and hate. The man's brown, hairy arms, hanging between his knees so that his fingers almost touched the ground, clenched and unclenched spasmodically.

"Had enough yet, Crosby?" Jim wanted to know, and deftly closed Big Lafe's other eye with a quick, powerful jab that rocked the man like a tree in a gale of wind. "Think yuh're liable to forget another time where yuh are an' who yuh're talkin' to? Yuh ain't? Well, treasure this one; it'll mebbe help to remind yuh just in case yuhr head might get confused sometime. . . . Now go lay down an' rest yuhr mind, whiles yuhr pardner absorbs a little useful information."

The impact of that final blow would have been audible at the other end of the yard, and Big Lafe went down before it like a poleaxed steer. Simultaneously, Louise Wentworth's voice rang out in a frantic cry of warning. Only for the fraction of a second had Jack taken his eyes from the man on the bottom step; but that was enough. The brown, hairy fingers flashed downward, scooped up a handful of sand and gritty dust from the yard, and hurled it full in the boy's face. The other hand darted inside the ornately braided vest, and jerked a small derringer from a concealed shoulder holster. The rays of the westering sun glinted on the blunt barrel of the wicked-looking little weapon—about the last in the world that a cattleman would be suspected of carrying.

Jack's gun exploded, but the youngster had been completely blinded by the shower of grit and dirt in his eyes, and his shot went wide of the mark. Nor could the report possibly have warned Jim Lorimer of his deadly danger in time. It was the girl's scream that saved him. He did not know what the threat was, but he realized intuitively whence it came, and he acted without hesitation. Forward and downward he flung himself across the unconscious Lafe Crosby, and his gun belched flame as he fell.

The roar of its discharge blended with another, sharper report, and was followed by a hideous shriek that choked off suddenly into a hoarse, gurgling moan. Like a bundle of old clothes, the desperado slid off the step and slumped in a huddled heap in the dust, his life blood gushing from a severed artery in his throat.

Lorimer picked himself up and strode toward the veranda, stooping to retrieve his sombrero, which had been sent spinning from his head. A small, round black hole, drilled neatly through the middle of the peaked crown, marked the course of the bullet from the derringer, and bore eloquent testimony to the narrowness of Jim's escape. There was no shadow of doubt as to what his fate would have been had he been standing upright at the time.

Louise Wentworth stared at him with dilated gaze.

"Yeah, he'd have nailed me plumb center, all right, hadn't yuh yelled just when yuh did, ma'am," Jim said soberly. "An' it would've served me dang well right for bein' such a dumb jackass as not to search him for another gun!"

"It—it was all my fault, Mister Lorimer," gulped Jack, his handkerchief to his smarting eyes. The boy was almost weeping, less from the sting of the sand and dirt than from mortification at having, for the second time, failed to measure up to his responsibilities.

But Lorimer would not listen to his stammered, shamefaced apologies. He put a kindly arm around him.

"Yuh done the best that yuh could, kid, an' yuh wasn't to blame a-tall for his playin' a trick on yuh that yuh wasn't noways expectin'. Like I told yuhr sister here, they wasn't no earthly excuse for me givin' the snake a chance to bite. But I had him figured for a ranchman, an' I never thought about him packin' one of them little snub-nosed can openers. Mostly, they ain't nobody but professional gamblers an' tinhorns goes heeled with them."

"But he is—he was—a professional gambler," Louise Wentworth said. "His brother owns one of the worst dives in Roaring Gap—the Here's How."

"Come to think of it, seems to me I remember passin' a place that said—Hello! Looks like our friend Crosby yonder has finished his nap!"

The battered hulk that was Lafe Crosby stirred and groaned, and dazedly dragged himself to a sitting position. He was a sorry object, smeared from head to foot with dirt and blood. From under blackened, swollen lids, he peered uncertainly about him, his hazy senses gradually clearing to the realization of where he was and why, and what the meaning was of that huddled, still heap at the foot of the steps. He blinked at it in a sort of sodden stupidity that refused, for a time, to take in its significance. At last, groaning and blaspheming, he lurched to his feet.

"That'll be about all from you, Crosby!" Lorimer admonished him sharply. "Yuhr cue is to walk soft an' sing small around here, from now on, sabe? The quicker an' quieter yuh give us yuhr room instead of yuhr company, the better it'll be for yuh. S'pose yuh fetch this feller's bronc over here, an' pack him outa Miss Wentworth's yard."

Big Lafe appeared to be about to refuse; but all the fight had been taken out of him by the terrific beating he had received. He hadn't, however, lost any of his venom. He limped sullenly over to the hitching-post and unfastened the horses.

In silence, Lorimer helped him to lift the limp body of the dead man and prop it across the saddle of one of the beasts. Crosby mounted the other, and headed the animals toward the gate. At a little distance, he turned in his saddle, his malignant gaze slowly sweeping the little group on the veranda, and rested on Lorimer.

"Yuh'll pay for this, feller," he promised, in a hoarse, croaking whisper, "an' yuh'll pay high. Afore Sam Bolton gets through with yuh, yuh'll be wishin' to Gawd that Dropper had drilled yuhr head instead of yuhr hat."

"Oh, yeah?" drawled Jim. "That so?"

"Yeah, that's so. We'll get yuh, 'fore yuh're twenty-four hours older, or my name ain't Lafe Crosby. An' when we do—" He did not finish the sentence, but put spurs to his horse, and galloped out through the gateway.

CHAPTER VI

"We'll See It Through!"

WHEN Jim turned again to Louise Wentworth, it was to find the girl staring straight before

her, her face pale and troubled, her hands clasped tightly together, as if to keep them from trembling.

"Shucks, ma'am, yuh ain't goin' to let a little hot air outa that busted balloon upset yuh, are yuh, now?" he said, with a tentative attempt at lightness. Of course she was upset—small wonder! She'd just been through a scene that would have stretched most girls out in a faint or sent them into hysterics.

She'd been mauled by a drunken brute; she'd seen her brother deliberately tortured, one man beaten to a pulp, and another shot to death at her very feet. And she'd kept her nerve and acted like a trump all the way through. It wouldn't do to let her go to pieces now.

He laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Listen, little lady," he said, "that 'just you wait an' see what happens to yuh' stuff don't mean a thing. Why, bless yuhr heart, Lafe Crosby wouldn't tackle me again for a million dollars, cash money! If I know the breed, an' I reckon I do, he wouldn't tackle any grown man. Makin' faces at women an' children is about his limit, an' even then, he has to have a pal along to help him! He's yellow, clean through."

"I know," the girl nodded. "Just the same, it's true, what he said. They'll get you for killing Dropper. I—I hadn't realized what it meant until just now. You want to get away from here as quick as you can, Mister Lorimer."

"I don't want to do no such a thing," Jim contradicted flatly. "An', furthermore, I ain't aimin'—"

"Oh, but you must!" she exclaimed. "You don't understand. It isn't Lafe Crosby you'd have to go up against; it's the whole gang! He'll ride straight back and tell them what's happened, and they'll be after you to a man. You wouldn't have a chance on earth.

"You must go; don't you see that you must? It won't make any difference to them that Dropper tried to get you from behind—they'll shoot you on sight. Don't waste time, please, Mister Lorimer! Get your horse and ride! Make straight for the hills, where you'll—"

"Hold on a minute, ma'am," Jim cut quietly across her growing excitement. "Who's all this 'they' yuh're talkin' about?"

"Why, Sam Bolton's outfit—the Long Diamond bunch. You don't know them as I do. They—"

"*Whew-w!*" Jim gave vent to a long, low whistle. "The Long Diamond bunch, yuh say? Well, mebbe it's a fact that I don't know 'em as you do, but I know some of 'em, all right. Had a little argument with four of 'em just before I rode up here, an' when the sheriff broke it up, we wasn't none of us lovin' each other much."

"The sheriff?" The girl was startled anew. "Why—"

"He told me the line formed on the right, goin' out, an' I took the hint an' left. Now, it kinda looks like I'll have to go back an' tell him I've crowned another Queen of the May, it does so!"

"Another— Good heavens you don't mean you killed another one of them in town, too?"

"Sure did. Had to. Not because I'm bloodthirsty, ma'am—honest. Shootin' a man when he's got his back turned seems to be one of their favorite pastimes, an' I don't cotton to it much. Just by good luck, McMahon himself come along when the music was startin' up, an' he gave me a clean bill. But I reckon I'll have to ask you an' yuhr brother to help me out this time. Yuh wouldn't mind ridin' back with me an' tellin' him how it come about that I—"

The girl struck her hands together in a kind of fierce impatience.

"Oh, you don't understand!" she cried. "You can't go back to town—you *can't*, do you hear me? Sam Bolton's got twenty-five or thirty men who do just as he tells them. He owns half of Roaring Gap, and runs it all to suit himself.

"The sheriff's honest all right, but he's just a figurehead. They've got him buffaloed. They'd kill you—murder you in cold blood—and neither he nor anybody else could do a thing about it. They'd have a story, and every last one of 'em would swear to it. Don't you see? You've already shot one of the crowd, and when Sam hears about Dropper, he'll go raving crazy. He—"

"This Dropper feller bein' one of his especial pets?"

"His brother! I thought I told you. Sam owns the Long Diamond and the Here's How, both, and Dropper always—"

"I reckon yuh did mention something about it, but I didn't get the names just rightly straightened out in my mind," Jim explained. "So I've pitched off the brother of the town's lead steer, have I? H'm-m-m."

The shadow of a frown clouded his eyes for a moment, as he remembered what McMahon had said. Then an odd little smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Mebbe I'll have to enter that contest, after all," he murmured grimly to himself. "Kind o' looks so, from where I stand."

The girl was watching him anxiously, pleadingly.

"You'll go now, won't you?" she begged. "Please! Every minute that you stand there talking, may count. Get your horse and head for the hills. It's your only chance!"

Slowly Jim shook his head.

"Nope. I'm sorry to disoblige a lady, but I can't do it, ma'am. If runnin' away's my only chance, well an' good. I ain't takin' it."

"But—"

"It means goin' on the dodge for doin' something that's no crime. Ain't a jury in Texas wouldn't turn me loose, an' I ain't goin' to turn myself into an outlaw for forty Dropper Boltons—an' that's flat. Please don't urge me no more, ma'am, 'cause it's no use whatever. I ain't runnin' away, an' I am goin' back to Roaring Gap to have this out with Sheriff McMahon. If yuh don't feel like ridin' along with me, why—"

"Of course we'll ride along with you, Mister Lorimer!" Jack burst out. He had kept silent as long as he could. "And I think you're right about it, and sis is wrong. Maybe when the sheriff hears what Dropper tried to pull off up here, he'll find a way to do something! If he can't, perhaps somebody else will. Sam Bolton may own the town, but he doesn't own all the men in it. And even if he did, there are some things even a bunch of scared rabbits won't stand for!"

Jim turned grave eyes from the boy's heated face to that of the girl, which had flushed a sudden indignant crimson.

"An' just what was it that Dropper tried to get away with up here, Jack?" he asked. "If yuhr sister don't mind, I'd like to have yuh tell me."

"I'll tell you myself," Louise said. "It—it's nothing to be proud of, but it—well, it explains why I was so upset about your killing Dropper. When I remembered who he was, and realized what it was going to mean—what it will mean if you're determined not to hit the out-trail—" She shuddered involuntarily, then controlled herself, and went on quietly:

"A year or two ago, Sam Bolton took a notion that he wanted to—to marry me. I'd always disliked him, and I said no. He didn't want to take that for an answer, and I had to speak out pretty plainly. Then he let me alone for a while, and I thought he'd given it up. But right after Father died, he started coming over here again. Jack and I were trying to run the ranch, but there wasn't much money; and after the bad drought we had last summer, there wasn't any.

"We couldn't hire help to care for our cows—couldn't pay 'em—and it was lean and scrawny stock anyway. We had to take what we could get for most of it. Bolton knew we were in a hole, of course—we're poorer than poverty, Mister Lorimer—and he used

that to try to make me change my mind."

"She means the dirty skunk threatened her!" threw in Jack. "I wasn't around every time he showed up here, so I didn't hear all of it, but I heard enough!"

"So did I," said Louise; "more than enough!" Her eyes—they were strangely beautiful eyes, Jim noticed, a clear, soft brown, with tawny golden lights in them—flashed as he had seen them flash when Lafe Crosby was twisting her brother's arm. "I told him to clear out and not come back, or he'd get a warmer reception than I'd ever given him before. He started to put up an argument, but I was wearing a gun, and I pulled it on him. Then he went; but he stopped long enough to tell me that he thought too much of me to see me sold up, as I certainly would be before the summer was over. He was going to find me a paying job, so that I could make enough money to live on."

"He was goin' to find yuh a job?"

She nodded, her lip curling scornfully; and Jim noticed that her hands were clenched into tight little fists.

"Thoughtful of him, wasn't it? He said that after I'd tried it awhile, if I found I didn't like it, maybe I'd change my mind, after all, and decide to come and keep house at the Long Diamond for him!

"That was last Sunday morning. Today, Dropper came in with Lafe Crosby—both of 'em drunk—and told me Sam had sent him to say that there was a fine job open and waiting for me, 'entertaining' at the Here's How. He said it was just the sort of thing I was fitted for."

"What?" ejaculated Jim Lorimer, scarcely able to believe his ears. He hadn't been inside the Here's How, but he knew what a cowtown honky-tonk was like, and Louise had said that Bolton's place was the worst dive in Roaring Gap. No more foul insult could have been offered to any respectable girl.

And to a girl like this one! The beauty and the charm and the fine, clean spirit of her were things that one might search for all one's life and fail to find. There was something about her that, from the very first glimpse he had had of her, had told Jim Lorimer that here was the one girl, the only girl, in the world for him.

He stood looking at her for a moment, without speaking. Then his narrowed gaze went past her, to the slowly settling dust haze that marked Lafe Crosby's passage down the road. His lips set in a straight, hard line.

"I reckon yuh've told me enough, ma'am," he said in measured tones. "Jack, what say we go ketch up them hawsses of yuhrs now? It's gettin' late, an' I got a little more business to 'tend to in town than I'd been figurin' on."

CHAPTER VII

Big Medicine

SHERIFF FRANK McMAHON sat in his ancient swivel chair, his feet propped on the corner of his stained and battered desk, and frowned down on the dented tin cuspidor on the floor beside him.

Through the half-open doorway of the office drifted the blurred medley of sound that was the voice of Roaring Gap. It was a voice that was ever changing and yet, paradoxically, always the same. A composite voice, blending a hundred different notes into a harsh, throbbing dissonance that rose and fell and rose and fell again in ceaseless reiteration.

But this afternoon a new and disturbing undertone threaded through its familiar monotony; and Sheriff McMahon heard it with growing uneasiness. He knew that it boded trouble for him—maybe big trouble. Sam Bolton would want to know why he, the sheriff, had let the young stranger who had killed Shorty Barnes go free. Sam would ride him hard and

long for that, might even haze him out of his job. Probably would.

And yet, the more the sheriff thought about it, the more certain he was that he had done not alone the right, but the only thing. He might not be sufficiently strong to buck the Bolton gang in the open, or break the power they flaunted so brazenly, but, at least, he was man enough to refuse to allow them to use him in their scheme to frame a man who had committed no crime. Unless it was a crime to defend your life and lawful property.

Bolton would consider it a crime, of course, because to him the only life or property which was sacred was his own. And Bolton would do his unscrupulous best to square accounts for what he had already proclaimed to be a gross dereliction of duty on the part of the sheriff.

McMahon could, of course, and plausibly enough, have set up the law as an excuse and taken refuge behind the letter of it. And nobody could reasonably have criticized him when Sam Bolton and his cutthroat crew took it into their own crime-stained hands and wreaked a bloody vengeance on Shorty Barnes' executioner.

But, in that case, he, Frank McMahon, would never have been able to look at himself in a mirror again without a feeling of contempt and disgust for the craven weakling that the glass reflected. He preferred to take what was coming to him and keep his self-respect.

Whatever happened to him he would not be an accessory to a murder, anyway; the death of the chestnut stallion's owner wouldn't lie at his door, as it most certainly would if he had not done his best to persuade young Lorimer to be sensible, and take himself and his handsome horse out of town.

With a clear conscience, but a troubled mind, the sheriff of Roaring Gap swung his squeaky chair about as light, quick footsteps sounded on the wooden walk outside, and someone ran up the steps and rapped on the half-open door.

"Come in, come in!" he called. "Door's open, ain't it? What yuh waitin' for? An engraved invite, mebbe?" His irritation changed to confused embarrassment when he saw that his caller was Louise Wentworth, and then with gaping, open-mouthed dismay, he recognized her escort.

"What in the name of the holy three-toed calf are you doin' here?" he broke off in the middle of an apology to the girl to roar at Lorimer. "Didn't yuh give me yuhr word no longer than three hours ago that yuh'd leave town?"

Jim nodded, dusting off a chair for Louise and motioning Jack, who had, of course, accompanied them, to a stool in the corner.

"I did, Mister McMahon," he acknowledged, "an' I kept it. I high-tailed it right out; an' I kept goin', too, as far as Miss Wentworth's place. Then I waltzed into a little nest of sidewinders, an' had to step on the neck of one of 'em. I let the other go, but he allowed he'd be back again with more of his tribe, an' I thought Miss Wentworth hadn't ought to be there next time he rattled, so we all come down here to tell yuh about it."

Rapidly, he outlined what had taken place at the Wentworth ranch, both before and after his arrival, omitting no essential detail.

"O' course," he concluded, in a tone that was meant for the sheriff's ear alone, "I'd have had myself an' nobody else to thank if Dropper Bolton had cashed in my chips for me. As it is, I've got Miss Wentworth to thank that he didn't. An' whiles I wasn't intendin' to plug him—just only to land him in the hospital for three-four months—I'm mighty glad he made the play he did with that derringer. He gave me the excuse to polish him off complete. He needed killin', McMahon—layin' his filthy paws on that girl! What's the matter with the men in

this part of the country, anyways, that they let varmints like him run loose?"

The sheriff's flush was not of anger, but of deep and honest mortification.

"Sam Bolton's the matter with 'em, I reckon, Lorimer," he said. "Him an' his bunch of bandits up at the Long Diamond have got a regular strangle hold on us here. We hardly dast call our souls our own. He's a killer, an' proud of it. An' he's got folks so scared of what'll happen to 'em if they cross him that they've plumb lost their nerve where he or any of his particular crowd's concerned.

"Case in point: matter of six months or so ago, a rancher by the name of Crane, over Spring Valley way, got into a little jam with him. They had it back an' forth, an' then Bolton brings in a bunch o' slick-ear outlaws from another county, sets fire to one of his barns, an' shoots up the ranch.

"Crane come to me, an' we organized a posse. Went up into the hills around Spring Valley an' scouted around for a couple of days. An' when we got back, Crane's house had been burnt to the ground, an' another rancher's that was out with us.

"There was notices tacked up all over town that if we didn't disband an' quit, there was plenty more buildings to go—an' a match 'ud be set to Roaring Gap itself some fine night. We couldn't prove nothin', of course, but we knew who was responsible.

"Well, after that, there just didn't seem to be nobody a-tall cravin' to lock horns with Sam Bolton. Crane even withdrew his complaint. He swore he'd made a mistake when he claimed he'd recognized some of the Long Diamond bad hats, an' hasn't never opened his mouth since. If he was hauled up as a witness, he wouldn't testify against Bolton; nobody would.

"They'd all split their tongues tellin' the world that he was an honest an' upright citizen, an' a big asset to the the community, because they know dang well that if they had anything to say against him, he'd collect damages, an' it wouldn't be in court, either."

"H'm-m-m," contributed Jim; and McMahon went on:

"I haven't got an' I can't get a deputy—not one single solitary stinkin' one—that I can trust an' that don't get the shakin' palsy when Bolton's name's mentioned. Oh, Sam's the big medicine in this town, all right, take it from me! *That's* what's the matter with the men hereabouts, Lorimer; and"—with a shrug that was half bitter, half self-scornful—"I've got a dose of the same disease, I reckon."

Jim merely looked at him, saying nothing, and he added:

"But I haven't got it bad enough to see anything happen to Lou Wentworth. She's one fine little girl, an' I'd cut off my right arm before I'd see her get into Sam Bolton's clutches. He's crazy about her—has been for years. An' she never could see him with a spyglass, which made him plenty wild.

"I'd ought to have kept an eye on her; made sure Sam wasn't pesterin' her. But she's independent as a hawg on ice, not askin' no odds of nobody. An', rotten as Bolton is, I never suspicioned he'd got so snake-belly low as what yuh've told me. That Here's How honkytonk—"

"Yeah; I know all about it," Jim helped him out.

"Well, then, o' course, something will have to be done. Just what, I don't know yet, but I'll figure it out. Meanwhiles, yuh done just right bringin' her off that ranch. She wouldn't be safe there a minute, any more'n yuh're safe in Roaring Gap. But she'll be all right an' well looked after at the hotel here. Ma O'Brien will see to it that she is, an' I'll take her round there myself an' put her an' Jack in the old lady's care whiles yuh're beatin' it."

Leaning forward, McMahon stuck out his hand.

"Yuh're a fine feller, Lorimer," he

said earnestly; "a mighty fine feller, an' I'm goin' to rest a whole lot easier when I know yuh've got clean away. I'm advisin' yuh not to lose any more time gettin' that circus hawss off the main street; he's as good as a steam calliope for attractin' attention. Good-by, lad, an' good luck to yuh."

But although Jim shook the proffered hand warmly enough, he made no move to leave.

"I'm right obliged for the kind remarks, Sheriff," he said, "an' for the good wishes; likewise the advice. But I can't see my way clear to followin' the last named—not this time. I took it once to-day, but that was when I hadn't no special attachment for this town, an' I couldn't see no reason for hangin' around it, just for the sake of mixin' into a mess of trouble.

"Now, things is different. I've sort of took a likin' to the place, an' I been figurin' on stayin' awhile—mebbe quite a considerable spell. Fact is, I wouldn't wonder if I decided to settle down here permanent."

"That's a matter will be decided for yuh, an' mighty quick, if yuh don't start poundin' leather!" the sheriff put in grimly. "Bolton's crowd is in town right now, an' beatin' the war drum. Unless yuh're just hell-bent on dancin' to his music, why, yuh'll—"

"I don't reckon I'm goin' to have an awful lot of time for dancin', Mister McMahon," Jim said, with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "I'll be lookin' for a job, an' when I find it, I'll be busy holdin' it down. I was thinkin' mebbe you could recommend me to somebody who'd start me in right away."

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff. "Only thing you'll find to hold down will be the bottom of a six-foot pine box—always assumin' there's enough of yuhr remains to be identified. I've given yuh my recommendation, Lorimer, to get the hell outa here. I'm stickin' to it. If yuh hadn't blew up in Sam Bolton's face first steer outa the chute, I could've sent yuh to a dozen men. Now, it 'ud be the same thing as shippin' yuh direct to the cemetery."

"You couldn't arrange to use me yuhrself, I s'pose?"

"Me use yuh? How? For what?"

Jim made a little deprecatory gesture.

"Why, from where I stand, yuh look to have a mite more on yuhr hands than yuh can rightly tend to alone, an' I figured I could mebbe be some help to yuh. How much do yuh pay yuhr deputies, anyways?"

Sheriff McMahon's bushy eyebrows went up.

"How much do I pay my deputies?" he echoed. "Why, yuh've certainly got a—"

"I've got a couple of guns, Sheriff, an' I ain't altogether ignorant as to how to handle 'em. An' I've got a pretty well grounded notion that a few doses of lead medicine, properly administered, might go a long way toward curin' up this disease that's afflictin' yuhr town. Likewise an' also, I've got this."

He drew a somewhat creased and dusty envelope from an inside pocket of his vest, took out the folded letter sheet which it contained. He extended the paper to the sheriff, who took it, glanced casually at it, and then, with a muttered exclamation, read it through with patent surprise and interest.

When he had perused it for the second time:

"Well, I'll be the seventh son of a gopher with the blind staggers!" he ejaculated, letting the paper fall to the desk and staring at Jim as if he had never seen him before. "So that's how the land lays, is it? Why, durn me for a thick-skulled old fool! I ought to have known right away when yuh told me yuhr name, but I never took a tumble. Not even when yuh beat Beef Weller to the draw an' put out Shorty Barnes' light— Yes, an' him behind yuh an' reachin' for his gun before yuh so much as moved! Well, I'll be eternally—"

He broke off and spun around in his swivel chair to face Louise Wentworth, who had been an intensely interested, if silent, spectator of the scene.

"Say, Lou, yuh know who yuhr boy friend here is?" he demanded, with more excitement than the girl had ever before seen him exhibit. "Nobody but 'Smilin' Jim' Lorimer—the galoot who busted up the Fly-by-Night gang over in Oklahoma—at Rio Hediondo, remember? An' this here's a letter from the governor, thankin' him personal for 'the signal service rendered this great commonwealth'! Well, in the name of the holy jumpin' three-toed calf, can yuh tie that, Lou?"

The girl's eyes were shining.

"I'm not surprised," she said simply.

"Yuh ain't? Well, I am! I'm so plumb flabbergasted, I reckon I could—"

"Do I get the job?" inquired Jim placidly.

"I'll say yuh get the job! That is, if yuh're really serious about wantin' it. Ain't ary hombre I ever heard tell of I'd rather have ask me for it. Yuh ain't stringin' me, Lorimer? Yuh actually mean that yuh want to—"

"I never was more serious in my life," Jim assured him. "So, both of us bein' agreeable, what say we settle it right now?"

"Then hold up yuhr right hand," said Sheriff McMahon, and he rattled off the form of the oath, which Jim repeated after him. "I got a badge knockin' round here somewheres. You put it on, an' then I'll take Lou an' the kid around to Ma O'Brien's, an' explain the situation to her. After that, me and you'll—"

Without the slightest warning, the door was suddenly flung open with such violence that it went crashing back against the wall, loosening several patches of plaster. A man, bull-necked, bullet-headed, with a great fleshy nose and little round beady black eyes stormed into the room.

His hectoring, domineering manner, quite as much as the almost startling resemblance he bore to the ruffian whom Jim had shot down at the Wentworth ranch, told the new deputy that he was in the presence of the evil genius of Roaring Gap—Sam Bolton!

CHAPTER VIII

A Challenge

ON any ordinary occasion, Sheriff McMahon would probably have made haste to rise from his chair on the entrance of this so important visitor. Among Sam Bolton's other unpleasant characteristics, was a habit of exacting an exaggerated courtesy which, in all essentials, amounted to servile obsequiousness from those to whom he contemptuously referred as "them white-livered rabbits down to the Gap."

But this was no ordinary occasion. It wasn't every day in the week that a famous two-gun fighter came to Roaring Gap and ranged himself on the side of law and order. The sheriff felt like a prisoner who, having been condemned to spend the rest of his life behind the bars of a cell, had unexpectedly received a full pardon. He did not get up, nor did he wither before the blast of vituperation and abuse which the Long Diamond owner loosed before he had fairly crossed the threshold of the room.

Bolton was beside himself; his voice hoarse and shaking with ungovernable fury. Mud bespattered, covered with sweat and dust, he had spurred at top speed for Roaring Gap as soon as Lafe Crosby had ridden in to the ranch, bringing Dropper's body and the story of how the gambler had come to his end.

As Louise Wentworth had told Jim, it signified nothing that Dropper had been killed in the very act of treacherously shooting him in the back. That he had been killed was the only thing which counted with Sam Bolton. That, and the fact that he had met death at

the hands of the very same man who had shot Shorty Barnes and whom Sheriff McMahon had allowed to ride away.

McMahon! Who the hell was McMahon, anyway? A rabbit, like all the rest of the rabbits in the town! A stuffed shirt with a tin star pinned on it! A louse-bitten coyote who had dared, by hell, to assume authority, because he'd been let to strut up and down the street wearing his silly little badge! Sheriff? He was a hell of a sheriff! He could take the trail of that dirty dry-gulcher now and bring him back alive before another sun had set, or he'd find out who was boss in Roaring Gap!

Sheriff McMahon sat calmly in his chair and listened with unmoved countenance while Bolton, punctuating his sentences with blows of his ham-like fist on the desk-top, inveighed against him for a fool, a traitor, a low-down, sneaking double-crosser who had been born without brains or guts and who would die the same way. It was not until the enraged man appeared to have exhausted most of his invective as well as his breath, that the sheriff spoke. Then:

"Better cinch up yuhr tongue, Bolton," he advised evenly. "They's a lady present—which yuh don't seem to realize!"

Bolton wheeled about, catching sight of Louise as he did so. It was his first intimation that anyone besides himself and the sheriff was in the room. Jim had moved a short distance away from the desk, and now stood between the girl and her brother, his face an expressionless bronze mask, his thumbs hooked into his belts above the butts of the two big ivory-handled forty-fives.

"'Twon't be necessary for the sheriff to go huntin' my sign to fetch me back, Mister Bolton," he drawled imperturbably. "I'm already here, an' I'm alive, too. An', in spite of two of yuhr crowd tryin' to put a window in my back, I'm still preferrin' to look frontways when I ask yuh where yuh get this dry-gulchin' talk yuh're spillin' around so careless-like?"

Sam Bolton's face suffused with dark blood until its already congested hue was nearly purple. He was not stupid enough to reach for his gun. The owner of the famous Long Diamond and the equally famous, or infamous, Here's How, was nobody's fool. From what he had been told of the manner in which his brother's and Shorty Barnes' activities had been summarily curtailed, he understood that he had to deal with no second-rate gunfighter.

Nor did he fancy the lithe, easy poise of Jim's body, and the way the two open holsters, hanging low on the front of the thighs, were tied down. Plenty of men, of course, carried two guns who were not expert in the use of even one. But, notwithstanding his seething rage and hatred, Bolton was clear-headed enough to know the difference between the counterfeit and the real thing.

Accordingly, he was careful to make no movement that might send those bronzed, sinewy fingers dipping toward the worn ivory grips so close beneath them, as he snarled:

"I'm askin' questions here, feller, not answerin' 'em! Who the blazin' hell are yuh, anyways?"

"Reservin' the right to differ with yuhr statement, Mister Bolton," Jim returned coolly. "I'm Jim Lorimer, one time of Rio Hediondo, right now deputy sheriff of Roaring Gap. An' I'm not particularly carin' for the way yuh come trompin' in here as if this here office was a honkytonk like the crooked joint yuh run down the street."

Louise Wentworth repressed a startled gasp as Jim thus unequivocally flung down the gauntlet. She had no fear for him if Bolton chose as openly to take it up. Louise had seen her young champion in action, and she knew that, in a fair fight, there was not one of the whole Long Diamond

crew who could begin to compare with

But it was not Sam Bolton's way to fight fair; he had proven that over and over again. If he matched shots with Jim Lorimer, it would be because he believed himself to be possessed of an overwhelming advantage. He would want, and he would craftily see to it that he had, a sure thing.

The sheriff, however, seemed to be troubled by no such apprehension as distressed the girl. He permitted himself a dry chuckle.

"'Smilin' Jim' Lorimer, Bolton," he amended Jim's identification significantly. "Yuh've heard tell of him an' the Fly-by-Night gang, mebbe? Well, he's doin' this town the honor of stoppin' in it long enough to straighten out a few little kinks that him an' me are agreed ain't noways to its credit." Now the sheriff did rise, standing set-faced and stern beside his desk. "One of these things is that a decent girl's to be safe from annoyance an' insult hereabouts, any place, any time, an' from anybody. Yuh understand that, do yuh, Sam Bolton?"

The Long Diamond man laughed with noisy insolence.

"Oh, yeah? Yuh've agreed on that, have yuh? What a long tail our cat's growed since this mornin'! Yuh're talkin' mighty tall, McMahon—mighty tall, for a feller that's got nothin' whatever to back up his chin music with!"

"But he's talkin' plain, Bolton, don't forget that," Lorimer put in gently. "An' he's talkin' in a language that any feller can understand."

"Yeah, an' I heard tell once of a deputy sheriff"—there was a venomous sneer in the way Sam Bolton pronounced the title—"that lived to a ripe old age, just on account of keepin' his snoot out of other folks' business. The same feller had a pardner who didn't hold with the idea—thought that because he had a reputation for bein' handy with a gun, he could horn in anywheres an' run things his own way. He died young. Lots of deputies"—again the ugly, arrogant sneer—"lots of deputies do, Mister Lorimer."

Not a muscle moved in the face of the man who, virtually single-handed, had rid Oklahoma of a band of notorious desperadoes which for months had terrorized the whole state. Bolton's thinly veiled threat—if, indeed, it could be called veiled at all—failed to stir him.

He knew that between him and the acknowledged boss of Roaring Gap the nature of the issue at stake had already been determined, and that things could end in only one of two ways: either in Bolton's death or in his own. He said evenly:

"Yuh're talkin' a little beside the point, Bolton; we weren't discussin' the mortality among deputy sheriffs, whether they take their orders from their own boss or from some jasper on the other side who's took a notion he's first cousin to the Almighty. What we were sayin' is that this part of the country has got so rotten that it stinks to heaven, an' the law's goin' to step in an' do a little disinfectin' hereabouts.

"In addition to that, I want to say a word to yuh, not as a representative of the law, but as just plain Jim Lorimer." The eyes that rested on the Long Diamond man's rage-distorted face were gray and still and deadly. "I want to say this to yuh, Bolton: just one more dirty insult from you or any of yuhr scaly bunch to Miss Wentworth, one more whisper from yuh about her takin' a job in that lousy dive of yuhrs, an' you an' me will settle it between us, personal.

"That ain't a threat; it's a promise. Keep her name outa yuhr mouth, an' let her alone, from now on. Don't go near her, an' don't speak of, to, or about her, any place, any time, or yuh'll answer to me for it. Get that, Bolton—an' *get out!*"

The gray eyes suddenly blazed. The tall, commanding figure took a swift step toward the big man, who moved

backward involuntarily. He was close to the door of the office; how close, he did not realize. His high, spurred heel caught on the edge of the sill, he lost his balance, and, clutching wildly at the air, toppled backward, and rolled over and over down the steps, bringing up almost under the feet of Windy Day—who promptly kicked him.

CHAPTER IX

Under Cover of Darkness

SAM BOLTON'S unpremeditated and undignified exit from the sheriff's office was uproariously funny; but there was nothing to be laughed at in the glare of black fury he turned over his shoulder as he picked himself up out of the gutter, mounted, and spurred furiously down the street. Louise Wentworth was torn between unrestrained mirth at his ludicrous discomfiture, and apprehension at the thought of the revenge that he would surely seek for it.

"If you never had an enemy before in your life, you've got one now," she told Jim. "There won't be room for two of you in the same state, let alone the same town. And, Mister Lorimer, Bolton will stop at nothing."

"Not even at the Border? That's fine!" Jim grinned cheerfully. "Because if there ain't room for both of us in the state, Bolton'll have to be movin' out of it. Stands to reason *I* can't go, don't it? I've just signed up for a brand new job with Mister McMahon, an' I wouldn't be playin' square with him was I to go off an' leave him flat—an' right at the beginnin' of the round-up season, too!"

There was no doubt in her mind as to the sort of "round-up" he was referring to, as he turned briskly to the sheriff.

"If it's all the same to you, sir," he said, "I'll just take Miss Wentworth an' her brother around to the hotel an' see to it that they're fixed up all right. Bolton's gone down to speak his piece to his friends, an' it seems to me to be a pretty good idea for us to get movin' before he makes up his mind what dirty trick he'll try to turn next."

Sheriff McMahon had a very distinct recollection of having announced that he himself would act as Louise's escort to the hotel, but, so long as Jim appeared to have forgotten it, he decided not to mention it again.

"Yeah; go ahead," he nodded. "Get hold of Ma O'Brien right away an' tell her what's what. She knows Lou, an' she'll see she's made comfortable an' has nothin' to bother her. It's gettin' along towards supper time, an' I reckon I'll quit here an' call it a day. It's *been* a day, too, all right!" he added, shaking hands with the girl and giving Jack a friendly thump on the shoulder.

At the door, Lorimer turned back for a word in private.

"We won't say nothin' about it to Miss Wentworth—no sense in worryin' her after what she's been though," he said quickly; "but, sometime this evenin', I'm goin' to sift into that Here's How dump an' give it the once-over. Thought I'd better tell yuh, just in case the lid should blow off."

The sheriff blew his nose resoundingly.

"'Twill," said he briefly. "Every last mangy son of a wall-eyed sow in Sam Bolton's bunch'll be layin' for yuh, Jim. Keep yuhr back to the wall an' the light outa yuhr eyes. Don't let nobody get behind yuh, an' look around every corner before yuh come to it. Roaring Gap can't afford yuhr funeral right now. Yuh hear me, boy?"

Jim grinned.

"I do," said he; "an' don't let it affect yuhr appetite worryin' about the dee-tails of yuhr costume as pall-bearer. I'm known plenty just as rough an' nasty, Sheriff. So long!" They gripped hands again, and Jim went whistling out of the doorway to join the girl and her brother, who were mounted and waiting for him.

They left their horses at the livery stable a couple of doors from the hotel, and then went in search of Ma O'Brien, who proved to be a stout, motherly-looking woman, with gray hair, a beaming smile, and a pair of arms as muscular as a blacksmith's. She had already heard three different versions of the afternoon's incidents—none of them at all favorable to the Bolton faction.

"I'll be mighty glad an' proud to take charge of this girl of yours, Jim Lorimer," she declared warmly. "As long as she stays in my house, Sam Bolton won't dare to stick his ugly phiz inside the door, or I'll bash it in for him!

"I've got a nice quiet room upstairs where Louise can get a good night's sleep, and rest herself, poor lamb, after this tryin' day, an' I'll put young Jack right next to her. Yourself will have to do with a room on the first floor here; but it's a good bed, an' I'm thinkin' you won't be after needin' any rockin' to put you to sleep."

Louise was very tired. She had begun to show the effects of the excitement and strain. Faint bluish shadows showed under her lovely eyes, and there was a weary little droop to the corners of her mouth.

The prospect of supper was the only thing that kept Jack awake. His arm, black and blue where Lafe Crosby's fingers had gripped it, still pained him, but not a great deal, he insisted; certainly not enough for anybody to fuss over. He didn't want to be fussed over, anyway. All he wanted was about ten hours' sleep, and he expected to start in on that as soon as he'd had something to eat.

Ma O'Brien cooked and served them an appetizing supper, and hovered solicitously about the table, pressing good things on them until they could eat no more. She was anxious to talk, and she did, asking innumerable questions, bubbling over with kindness and sympathy. But the girl's fatigue would have been apparent to far less discerning eyes; and it was still quite early when Ma announced her intention of exercising her authority as temporary guardian, and packing her charges off to bed!

"That's about the right dope for 'em, I'd say," Jim agreed, yawning behind his hand and pretending a weariness he did not feel. "Nobody's goin' to hear me complain about havin' to hit the hay, either."

He accompanied Louise to the door of her room, noting with satisfaction that it was halfway down the corridor, and overlooked a clear, open space, with no adjoining or nearby roof from which a midnight marauder might gain access to its windows. There was a substantial lock on the door, and he pointed to it meaningly.

"See that, ma'am? Well, when yuh go inside, fasten it an' keep it fastened. Don't unlock it for no reason whatever, nor for nobody, unless it's me or Frank McMahon. Not even for Ma O'Brien, until yuh've heard the breakfast bell ring. An' even in the mornin', yuh're not to go outside this hotel on any account, unless the sheriff or I'm here to go with yuh. *Not on any account,* understand?"

There was a stressed emphasis on the words, the significance of which there was no mistaking.

"I want yuhr solemn promise that yuh won't do either of them things, ma'am—open yuhr door before it's full daylight, or go outdoors afterward unless one of us two is with yuh."

"You have it!" she replied, without hesitation, adding, with a little smile: "The whole town can come and bang on that door and implore me to open it, and I shall refuse. Only, I hope they don't, because I'm terribly sleepy, and I don't want to be waked up for hours and hours. And I give you my word, I won't set foot out of doors until I've seen you in the morning, or until you send me word that it's all right for me to—"

"No!" Jim broke in sharply. "That won't do—no ma'am! Messages don't go! Anybody a-tall can deliver a faked message, can't he? I want yuh to wait for Frank McMahon or me in person!"

"I see," she nodded gravely. "I didn't think of that. I promise you I'll wait. You think of everything, don't you, Mister Lorimer? I don't know how I'm ever going to thank you for all you've done—are doing—for Jack and me. I—"

"Mostly, my friends leaves off the handle to my name an' calls me just pain 'Jim,'" Lorimer interrupted. "An' whiles you an' me ain't known each other for a very long time, it's been a fairly busy one, so far, an' it's goin' to be longer, I reckon. I'm hopin' so, anyways. I'd hate to think it was just goin' to be 'hello' an' 'so long'—so if yuh wouldn't mind—"

Impulsively, the girl held out her hand to him. It was a firm, capable little hand, slim and soft, and yet amazingly strong. Holding it in both his own—rather longer, it must be admitted, than was strictly necessary, and rather tighter than he realized—Jim Lorimer felt his pulses quicken thrillingly.

"It's a bargain, if you'll call me 'Louise' or 'Lou,'" she said. "Mother always used 'Louise'; but Father preferred 'Lou,' and so does Jack, when he doesn't say 'sis.'"

"I don't reckon I'd care about the 'sis' part, none whatever," stated Jim positively. "So it'll have to be one of the others. Which do yuh fancy yuhrself?"

"Me? Oh, I think I like 'Lou' better, somehow."

Lorimer nodded slowly, portentously.

"Well, now, I wouldn't wonder if I could get to like Lou pretty well myself, if she'd only give me the chance," he drawled. And there was something behind his crooked, whimsical smile that brought the warm color to her cheeks. Hurriedly, she tried to take her hand from his clasp.

But perhaps she did not try very hard, or perhaps his fingers had tightened about hers. Anyway, instead of pulling away, she was drawn toward him, gently yet compellingly, until, unresisting, she stood within the circle of his arms.

For a moment, he held her close, possessively but very tenderly, as one holds some infinitely precious thing. Then he bent his head, and his lips met hers, young and warm and shyly responsive, in a kiss that was like a seal to some solemn pact.

Less than twenty-four hours before, neither had been aware of the existence of the other. But youth had called irresistibly to youth. In the dimly lighted corridor of a little cowtown hotel, blue eyes had looked deep into golden brown ones, and seen there the stuff that dreams are made of. . . .

Reluctantly, at last, he released her. She smiled adorably at him over her shoulder.

"Good night, Jim—dear," Louise breathed. "I'm so glad you're tired, because that means you won't be out, running into heaven knows what danger downtown to-night. Good night!"

"Good night, Lou, girl. Sleep sweet!"

She turned to wave her hand to him before she closed and bolted the door of her room, and he waved back from the landing, watching her with all his heart in his eyes. His girl—his! And people said that miracles didn't happen any more! His girl, to love and honor and protect and cherish—and fight for! His own girl!

He did not go downstairs. Instead, he tiptoed along the corridor, past her room, to a window at the far end, which looked out over the low roof of the porch and commanded a view of the opposite side of the street.

It was pretty dark there, and, at first, he could see nothing that looked at all suspicious. Then, after a moment, he made out a small, dull, nebulous glow that alternately brightened and faded, reflected against the dim

gray of an adobe wall. Some furtive watcher behind the projecting angle of a building was wiling away the tedium of guard duty by smoking a cigarette!

An amused and derisive smile flickered over Jim Lorimer's face. So Mister Sam Bolton was expecting him presently to sally forth from the front door of the hotel, was he? And he had a spy posted ready to shoot him down as soon as he appeared, had he? Very thoughtful of Mister Bolton, who, unfortunately, was going to be disappointed. So was the gentleman with the cigarette, who, to the best of Jim's knowledge and belief, had been cooling his heels there since early dusk.

Jim wished him a pleasant time, and, turning from the window, tiptoed back along the hall and down the stairs.

Just outside the dining room, he met Ma O'Brien, and stopped to chat for a moment, yawning cavernously the while. Taking pity on him, the good woman grasped him by the shoulders and gave him a vigorous shove toward his own room.

"Get along with you, an' don't be after rippin' me good sheets to pieces with them spurs!" she called after him.

But, once inside, with the door shut and locked behind him, Smilin' Jim Lorimer did not act in the least like a man who was overcome with the desire for sleep. He took out his guns, cleaned them carefully, refilled the chambers with fresh cartridges, and spun the cylinders before replacing the weapons in their holsters.

Then he stepped to the window, which opened on a dark, narrow alley separating the hotel from the building next to it. Here he stood, absolutely motionless, for fifteen or twenty minutes, eyes and ears alert.

Satisfied at last that the location of his room was unknown to his enemies, at least as yet, and that no waiting assassin skulked in the shadows without, he flung one leg over the window sill, gripped the frame firmly with both hands, and cautiously lowered himself to the ground.

A moment later, moving with the silent, stealthy tread of a cat, he had skirted the rear corner of the building, and disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER X

The Trap

LOUISE WENTWORTH woke with a start. She had no idea what the time was, or how long she had been asleep. She thought it could not have been many hours, although she felt somewhat rested and refreshed. Too, it was still pitch-dark in her room, and the windows, which faced the east, revealed a band of sable sky studded with brilliant stars —stars far too bright to presage the near approach of dawn.

It couldn't be time to get up. The whole house was steeped in silence, and not a soul was to be heard stirring in the kitchen below. But she had heard something, surely; something had penetrated and broken her pleasant dream. She had been dreaming, about the ranch, with its dilapidated corrals and barns rebuilt, its fences mended. Its slopes and green bottom lands had been dotted with sleek whitefaces, bearing the Flying W brand on their red flanks. A delightful dream—but one that was hardly likely to come true!

She had about reached the drowsy conclusion that she must have been mistaken, and merely imagined some unusual sound, when it came again; a soft, muffled tapping on the panels of her door. Wide awake on the instant, she sat up in bed.

"Who's there?" she called sharply. "What is it?"

There was no reply, but the tapping continued insistently; and, all at once filled with a fear that something was gravely amiss, she flung back the bedclothes, thrust her bare feet into her slippers, and padded quickly to the door.

"Who is it?" she called again. "You, Jim?"

A voice which she did not recognize replied in a guarded undertone. It said:

"No, ma'am, it ain't. Jim's bad hurt, an' Frank McMahon asked me would I come an' tell yuh. The poor feller's askin' for yuh, ma'am."

Jim hurt! The thought was a sharp pain that stabbed through her like a knife. Badly hurt, and asking for her. He wouldn't do that, unless—

Her suddenly unsteady fingers were fumbling for the bolt, when across her mind flashed the memory of her promise to him. He wouldn't have exacted it of her without a good reason! Not on *any* account was she to unfasten her door, he had said. And: "Messages don't go. Anybody a-tall can deliver a faked message, can't he? Yuh're to wait for Frank McMahon or me in person."

Well, then, what guarantee had she that this message was genuine? Jim had certainly told her that he was tired, and had started for his own room. Had he been hurt there—treacherously shot? Impossible! She would have heard the report of the gun, the attendant commotion. And anyway, after his solemn warning, would he have sent a total stranger to ask her to come to him? It was a thousand to one chance that he wouldn't!

"Where is he, please?" she asked cautiously, trying to speak in a natural voice conveying just the proper amount of anxiety. "What's happened to him?"

"He's down to the Paramount, ma'am—stepped right into a coupla forty-five slugs. The doc's with him, too, tryin' to fix him up, but yuh best to hurry, ma'am, if yuh want to see him alive. I got a hoss waitin' for yuh outside, an' I'll take yuh right to him."

"And who are you?" the girl demanded.

"Jeff Slade, of the Bar J Slash, ma'am. Yuh don't know me, I reckon, but Frank McMahon does. 'Jeff, old friend,' says he, 'for Gawd's sake, go fetch that little girl here quick,' says he. 'Jim's dreadful bad hurt, an' he wants to see her 'fore he goes.' McMahon an' the doc, they're both with him, like I told yuh, ma'am—"

"So's your grandmother's tortoise-shell cat!" Louise cut in scornfully. Of course it was a fake! Jeff Slade, whoever he might be, had probably never even seen Jim Lorimer. Jim was downstairs, sound asleep in his own room, never dreaming what was going on right over his head. She thought she could guess who had sent this lying rascal to her, and why. If she hadn't been half drugged with sleep herself, she'd have known him for an impostor right away. A trick that wouldn't deceive a baby, this!

"You're lying, Slade," she declared crisply. "Jim's not hurt, and he never told you to come here. Sam Bolton did. Well, you trot right along back to him, and tell him I passed my third birthday about sixteen years ago. Go on—get out! And don't lose any time about it, either, because I've got a gun here, and if you make me too nervous, it might go off and hurt you. Start!"

"Now, then, ma'am, listen," Slade whined. "Yuh got me all wrong, ma'am. I wouldn't lie to yuh, honest. I swear—"

"I'm going to count ten," said Louise. "If you haven't gone by then, I'll rouse the house—and Jim Lorimer's in it, remember! One . . . two . . . three . . . four. . . ."

There was a scurry in the hall which told her that the decoy had hurriedly withdrawn; then silence. With her heart beating hard, she listened, ear pressed against the panel of the door, intent on making sure that the scoundrel had really taken himself off. The top step of the stairs creaked rather noisily unless one were very careful in stepping on it, and she had heard no such sound. It might be that Slade was still outside in the hall somewhere.

She might have screamed, alarmed the house as she had threatened; but suppose Jim were to rush out from his room only to be met with a fusillade of bullets from the darkness? She couldn't, she wouldn't, risk that!

For a brief interval, the silence held. Then, faintly, because of the thickness of the door, she detected a movement, a whisper. Holding her breath, she strained her ears to catch it. It was the man who called himself Jeff Slade, conferring with someone else—obviously a confederate.

"All damn foolishness," she heard him mutter. "I told the boss she was too smart to fall for any such a gag. Sam's got as much chance of gettin' her to-night as Dropper has of goin' to heaven, just about!"

"Aw, hell! She might have fell for it, only yuh talked too much," his companion accused in a harsh whisper. "If yuh'd 've left her to me, I'd 've put it over, I bet yuh, easy as spittin' in a well. But all the chance we did have has gone glimmerin' now.

"We'll have to go back an' tell Sam she suspicioned us an' got cagy, that's all. An' we better light a shuck outa here 'fore she mebbe starts raisin' the roof an' has the whole damn shebang down around our ears."

"My sentiments exact." This was Slade again. "Watch out for that top step, pardner; it squeaks like a bum fiddle. I kinda hate to face Sam, but I told him 'twas just a waste of time, our comin' here, anyways; so he can't blame me."

"Not a tee-total waste, Jeff. Yuh heard the dame say that jasper was still in the house, didn't yuh? Well, now we know it for sure, we can lay for him an' nail him the minute he shows his head against the light. That was what yuh wanted to do in the first place, wasn't it? Well, about four of us, planted just right, 'll settle his hash, pronto. Come on; we'll go report to Sam, an' then we'll—"

The whispers grew fainter, died away altogether. Footsteps retreated down the hall. The top step of the stairs creaked ever so little, and, presently, came an almost inaudible sound, that was like the slight concussion of air caused by the careful closing of the front door.

The girl straightened up from her crouching position, shivering with a chill that was not from the raw air of the room. So that was it! They were planning to murder Jim; shoot him down in cold blood, without giving him a chance for his life! He'd wake up and start out from the hotel, perhaps before dawn. He'd probably light his lamp when he put his clothes on— "show his head against the light. . . ."

She shivered again, forgetting the narrowness of her own escape in her new born fear for him. She'd really been in no danger, anyway—although if Jim hadn't warned her, she'd probably have been simpleton enough to step into Sam Bolton's obvious trap.

But Jim—he didn't know that black-souled coward as she knew him. Jim wouldn't dream that Bolton would dare to have him killed in broad daylight. Nor would he guess—and she felt a slight prickling sensation at the roots of her hair as the thought struck her that after Jeff Slade had made his report, Bolton might send one of his Mexican breeds to slip a knife between his ribs as he slept. The room was on the first floor, and could easily be reached from the ground. Jim was tired. He'd sleep soundly. And they would come like shadows. . . .

She snatched up her dress, slipped it on over her nightgown, and fastened it with trembling fingers. It was the work of only a moment to pull on her stockings and replace her soft-soled slippers.

She had been in the hotel many times before, during her father's lifetime, and she knew every inch of it. There was a boxed-in back stairway, leading to the kitchen, she could slip down that, through the rear passage

by the storeroom, and come out within a dozen feet of Jim's door. She needn't go down the front stairs or through that hall at all.

She glanced into Jack's room, communicating with her own. The boy, however, was deep in the slumber of tired and healthy youth, and had not stirred since his head touched the pillow. No use in waking him; she could warn Jim and be back in her room again within a few minutes.

With the utmost care, she slid back the bolt, opened the door to the hall on a crack, and listened, ready to slam the door shut again and shoot the bolt home if she heard the slightest suspicious sound. But she did not, nor did she really expect to.

She was positive that Jeff Slade and his accomplice had been alone, and there had not been time enough for them to report to Sam Bolton and return. Anyway, they wouldn't try to trick her again to-night; they knew that it would be futile, now that her suspicions had been aroused.

She stepped softly out into the hall and felt her way along the plastered wall to the back stairs, gliding noiselessly down them and through the big kitchen to the passage opening at its farther end. Here she paused again to listen.

A coyote yelped somewhere off in the lower hills, and half a dozen dogs made hoarse reply. The metallic tinkling of a tinny piano could be heard from some honkytonk toward the lower part of the town, and a thin-voiced rooster, anticipating the dawn by hours, crowed in feeble competition. But within the house, there was not a sound.

With her fingertips, Louise tapped lightly on Jim Lorimer's door. There was no response. She tapped again, a little louder, but still lightly, so as not to awaken anyone else in the house. Still no answer was forthcoming, and she tried the knob. It yielded readily, turning in her hand. A slight pressure, and the door swung open.

"Jim!" she called softly. "Jim! It's I—Lou!"

She took a step into the yawning darkness of the room. The next instant, a powerful hand seized her wrist in a vise-like grip; another was clapped over her mouth, smothering the terrified scream that rose to her lips. Her feet were rudely kicked from under her, she was caught up and borne swiftly over to the bed, where, in a trice, a gag was forced into her mouth. Despite her frantic struggles, her ankles were tied together and her wrists were bound behind her back with strips of rawhide.

A face was thrust so close to her own that she could feel the hot radiation from its bloated flesh. The nauseating reek of stale whiskey was rank in her nostrils, blown on a thick whisper.

"Well, Lou, here we are again! Yuh wouldn't come when Jeff Slade asked yuh all nice an' polite, but he don't know females the way me an' Sam does. Yuh can't count on 'em to do nothin' open an' aboveboard, but if there's a keyhole in the county, yuh can bet yuhr saddle they're goin' to listen at it, every time!"

Lafe Crosby! If there had been one thing needed to complete the girl's shrinking horror and dismay, it would have been the knowledge that she was in the power of this particular drunken beast and cutthroat. She was as helpless as a log. She could neither move nor utter a sound.

They had got her. Sam Bolton and Lafe Crosby had got her. Sam Bolton. . . . A wave of faintness swept over her, leaving her shuddering, half dazed, with the sickening realization beating like a hammer at the back of her mind, that they had tricked her, after all.

They had meant her to hear them conferring together in the hall upstairs; meant her to deceive herself with a sense of false security. Meant her to believe that Jim was in danger and come to his room to warn him.

against it. Meant to trap her just exactly as they had.

Where was Jim? Had he really been shot? Had they killed him? Was he, perhaps, lying somewhere in the darkness—the awful, horrible darkness, of this very room? The hideous thought made her brain reel. She struggled in a sort of wild, insensate frenzy to free herself from the ropes that bound her; strove, vainly, to cry out.

"Now, then, Lou, no use in makin' a fuss," Crosby's whiskey-laden voice rasped in her ear. "Lay quiet an' behave yuhrself, or I'll have to lam yuh a couple to make yuh. Lay still, yuh hear me, gal? Nothin's goin' to happen to yuh. Me an' Jeff Slade, we're just goin' to take yuh for a nice little ride down to Sam's place. Ain't never seen the cute little burrow he's got up over the Here's How, have yuh?"

Crosby cackled softly, maliciously.

"No? Well, lemme tell yuh, it's a dandy! Sam, he thought yuh might enjoy havin' a look at it, an' he's waitin' there right now to show it to yuh. Ain't many gals he lets go up there. Seems like Sam thinks a heap of yuh, Lou. He was so all-fired anxious to get yuh to spend the evenin' with him that he just couldn't wait to send yuh no formal invite. No sir, he was bound he was goin' to see yuh to onct."

Again Crosby broke into a malicious cackle of laughter that Jeff Slade hushed abruptly.

"Come on, yuh fool! What yuh wastin' time for? We been plenty long doin' this job. Fetch that gal over here to the window, an' let's go."

"Fetch her yuhrself!" snapped Lafe. "I got a sore arm, an' she don't weigh so light as she looks. You lug her over to the window an' lower her out, an' I'll go down first and ketch hold of her. If she's to get her head broke, likely Sam 'ud rather tend to it hisself."

". . . the cute little burrow he's got up over the Here's How". . . . Those words of Lafe Crosby rang like a knell in the girl's ears.

Jim had suspected some trick. Jim had warned her—had made her promise solemnly not to open her door or leave her room on any account whatever until after the breakfast bell had rung. This was all her own fault. She had been a fool. If she'd only kept her promise— But, oh, she had been afraid for him. And now, she had brought utter ruin and disaster on herself, perhaps brought death to him. . . .

Her mind was a whirling vortex of horror and confusion as Jeff Slade tied a rope around her body, and lowered her from the window into the waiting arms of Lafe Crosby, standing outside.

There were horses in a cross alley back of the hotel. Slade tossed her across his saddle as if she had been a sack of meal. Then he spurred off, followed by the still maliciously chuckling Lafe Crosby.

CHAPTER XI

The Boss of Roaring Gap

THE distance between the hotel and the Here's How saloon and dance hall was probably less than a half mile; but, in his high-heeled, tight-fitting riding boots, a walk of even that short distance was about the equivalent of a hard day's work for Jim Lorimer. Yet it never once entered his head to ride Windy Day.

In the first place, the stallion was far too conspicuous; and, in the second, the new deputy shrewdly surmised that a little lead might be unraveled before he had finished his partly official tour of inspection, and he was taking no chances on the stallion stopping any of it.

Therefore, avoiding the lighted main street, where he was certain to be promptly seen and recognized, he took his way through dusty, little-traveled back roads and refuse-littered alleys, approaching the saloon from the lower end of the town.

Pushing open the swinging half-doors, he stepped into the noisy,

crowded barroom, where teamsters, Mexicans, cowboys, and assorted nondescript individuals jostled one another for place at the long, imitation mahogany slab, with its inevitable foot rail, which extended along one side, from front to rear, of the big, almost square room.

Opposite the bar, in the farther corner, a four-piece orchestra occupied a slightly raised platform, in front of which was a space cleared for dancing. The instruments all stood in rather obvious need of tuning; the scantily dressed girl "entertainers" were not girls at all, but mature women, with painted faces and hard, lackluster eyes. But nobody seemed to mind, and the dancing was going forward with a rowdy zest that made up in energy what it lacked in spontaneity or grace.

The rest of the floor space on that side of the room was taken up by tables catering to the devotees of sundry games of chance; faro, seven-up, stud or draw poker, and the inevitable blackjack. The Here's How possessed a quite unenviable reputation for employing crooked dealers; but nobody seemed to mind that, either, if the crowded condition of the tables were any criterion by which to judge.

Jim's entrance appeared to create no particular interest among either the patrons or the employees of the house. But, in spite of any perceptible demonstration, he was conscious of a sort of electric expectancy in the atmosphere of the place. The probabilities were, he was well aware, that everyone in the room had heard not only of the shooting affray of the early afternoon in front of Bill's Big Eats, but also of the subsequent killing of Sam Bolton's brother up at the Flying W Ranch.

And the very fact that nobody evinced any openly marked curiosity in regard to the newcomer was in itself a danger signal sufficient to point to a state of affairs that only a supremely reckless man or a fool would ignore.

Jim Lorimer was neither reckless nor a fool. Yet, apparently, he did ignore it. He gave not the slightest sign of being aware that he had walked into the very stronghold of his enemies. Nothing could have been more clearly indicative of complete freedom from apprehension or anxiety of any sort than the careless ease with which he lounged over to the bar and gave his order to the swarthy Mexican who presided there.

"Just thought I'd drop in an' see yuh for a few minutes," he remarked affably, "partly because I'm cravin' a little liquid refreshment, but mostly to have a chance to get acquainted with you an' the boys that hangs out here regular."

"Yeah?" The barkeeper was not exactly attractive, his dark skin being greasy and heavily pitted with pockmarks; and although his manner was civil enough, he managed to put a sly sneer into his short reply. He set out bottle and glass, and, while his customer poured the drink, rested two grimy hands on the inner side of the mahogany slab. His small, restless little black eyes took in every detail of Jim's appearance.

"So yuh're plannin' to settle down here in Roarin' Gap for a while?" he remarked presently, as if satisfied with the result of his scrutiny.

Over the rim of his tilted glass, Jim nodded.

"Uh-huh. Permanent, I wouldn't wonder. She looks to me to be a likely little town, an' since I've pinched me off a pretty good job, I can't see no special reason for movin' on."

"Pretty good job, huh? That sounds interestin'. I hope nothin' happens to interfere with yuhr plans—I mean, about settlin' down here permanent." The qualification was tacked on after an almost imperceptible pause, and its double meaning was not lost on Lorimer.

"Well, I don't reckon nothin's likely to—now," he drawled, setting down his

glass. "Take this afternoon, for instance, though. I was figurin' on pullin' out, forkin' my own hawss. A couple of fellers or three got it into their heads that it wasn't the thing for me to do, which was plumb unreasonable of 'em. I told 'em so, an' finally they come to agree with me, so I did ride out, an' on the hawss aforementioned, just like I started to in the first place."

He smiled benignly at the Mexican, and poured himself another drink.

"However," he added cheerfully, "I changed my mind before I'd gone very far, an' sashayed back. An' when I was talkin' with the sheriff, havin' a little business to tend to at his office, he happened to mention somethin' about bein' short of deputies. I put in a bid for a job right away, an', by good luck, got it. An' here I am, just droppin' in to get acquainted, like I reckon I told yuh before."

During the progress of this ingenuous explanation—which explained nothing to the bartender of which that worthy was not already perfectly cognizant—Jim's back had been turned to the great majority of the men in the room. Frank McMahon had solemnly warned him against turning his back to anybody. But Smilin' Jim Lorimer, late of Rio Hediondo, knew what he was doing—knew it better than the sheriff ever would.

To be sure, the barroom of the Here's How was a tinder box; but even the dryest tinder does not ignite spontaneously, wholly of itself. There must be some overt act to supply the necessary spark to set it off. And who was there in the curious, puzzled crowd brave enough to challenge this serenely smiling young man whose bronzed fists were packed with dynamite, and who dealt out certain and uncannily swift death without even looking over his shoulder?

He had conclusively demonstrated that trifling with him was a losing business; and his air of careless self-confidence—so diametrically different from the tense, narrow-eyed watchfulness of the professional two-gun fighter—was strangely mystifying. The crowd didn't understand it; and what an ignorant man doesn't understand, he instinctively mistrusts.

There was scarcely a person in the Here's How who did not feel some degree of awe of the slender, blue-eyed stranger, and wonder uneasily what his particular game was. Because it was unthinkable that he would dare to venture into the place unless he had some game, carefully worked out and planned so that whoever made the first hostile move against him would have immediate cause to regret it.

Which was exactly what Lorimer had wanted them to think, and had coolly counted on them thinking. He had dealt with herd psychology and herd fears before!

Still with the placid, good-humored smile on his lips, he handed some silver coins to the bartender, nodded in friendly fashion as though the brief interview had been an eminently agreeable one, and turned away from the bar.

He swept the whole of the big room with one seemingly casual glance that gave him a mental picture of pretty nearly everyone and everything in it, and then, whistling softly to himself, threaded his way among the tables. Once or twice he sidestepped deftly to avoid being jostled by persons who seemed to be seized with an irresistible desire to move as he approached. For, to jostle a man was a tried and true, if somewhat threadbare, method of picking a quarrel with him; and while Jim fully expected to be involved in one before he was many minutes older, he purposed choosing his own time and position for it. Incidentally, when he got good and ready, he intended to start it himself, rather than have it forced on him.

Well to the farther side of the room, a hatchet-faced, sleek-haired man, with long, tapering fingers, who wore the traditional black-and-white of the pro-

fessional gambler, was dealing faro at a green, cloth-covered table, where the play was running high. He did not look up as Jim passed him, but when the latter paused by the wall, ostensibly for the purpose of building a cigarette, his pale eyes flickered meaningly toward a man at the lower end of the table. This person immediately arose, tore up his tab, and, loudly cursing his luck, shouldered and dodged away through the crowd until he was lost to sight among the shifting groups around the bar.

Jim did not offer to take his place, and declined with a good-humored shake of his head the invitation of the player next to the vacated chair. He had not paused by this particular table solely on account of his interest in the game, although, as it happened, he was especially fond of faro.

But, on his way across the room, he had caught a glimpse of the man who had just motioned him to sit in the game. This was a quiet-mannered, thin-lipped man, with a dark, saturnine face. One of his cheeks was slightly puckered by a short scar that ran obliquely from the corner of his mouth.

Jim had never seen this man before; nevertheless, he recognized him at once. There could hardly be another two-gun fighter in the Southwest who answered so perfectly to the description of Lupe Thorne, bandit, killer, and general all-around badman!

Thorne, evidently, was in the game —in more ways than one. In the lookout chair at the dealer's right, matted hair straggling over his collar, was no other than Squint Bishop. Squint was not armed, and he seemed to have been at some pains to advertise the fact. He wore no coat or cartridge belt, and his spotted calfskin vest was buttoned up tight. No shoulder holster there! As the young deputy, apparently noticing nothing, had neared the table, Squint had hurriedly prodded the dealer in the ribs with a monitory elbow.

What for? To advise him, of course, that the man whom all Bolton adherents had been ordered to lay for, was headed their way! To Jim, the action admitted of no other interpretation. And the prompt withdrawal of one of the players, cursing the luck which had just won for him on both cards of the turn, underscored the significance of the signal.

The two incidents crystallized into certainty Jim's surmise that the trap was all set and baited for him and ready to be sprung. His conviction was further strengthened by the unobtrusive drift of certain rough-looking individuals from the bar, to form a fringe at the edge of the cleared space about the platform.

Coincidently with their coming, although the orchestra still blared and blatted energetically, the houris of the dance disappeared, one by one. They had been ordered off the floor, doubtless on the theory that they were more of an asset to the Here's How if alive and active in the pursuit of their sorry profession, than if they were injured or put out of commission altogether by a wild shot or two.

Oh, yes; something was going to break before long! But now, Jim was ready for it. The thick adobe wall of the building was the only thing behind him, and the gang might open the ball as soon as they pleased. The sooner, they did, the better, Jim told himself grimly. Sam Bolton was not in the room, and there was no telling whether he was somewhere about the premises, or parading his presence in another part of town, by way of establishing an alibi should any awkwardness occur. But Jim didn't care where Bolton was, or why. All he was waiting for was to have somebody start something!

He had not long to wait. The deal ended with Three-Spot Kelly jubilating over having correctly called a cat-hop on the last turn. The dealer raked in the bets of the losers, paid off Kelly and the thin-lipped, sat-

urnine Thorne, and leveled off the stacks of chips in the check-rack. Then, under pretense of straightening the cloth, he lifted his dealing box, and, in setting it down again, allowed it to slide to the floor.

If it were an accident, it was the result of sheer clumsiness; and professional faro dealers are not, as a rule, conspicuously clumsy. Jim didn't believe that it had been an accident. An instant later, when the dealer stooped to pick up the box and return it to the table, he knew it was intentional. For—it wasn't the same box!

The original box reposed, doubtless, in a convenient pocket of the long black coat. The one in sight resembled it exactly in all but a very minute detail. This was a clever little contrivance which some lofty-minded public benefactor had perfected, with the idea of enabling a dealer to change the run of the cards when luck had been going against the bank.

Jim Lorimer had inspected similar boxes before, and he knew this specimen at once for what it was. Knew, too, why it had been produced in this particular way at this particular time. Not to cheat the men at the table—there was no percentage in a dealer ringing in a crooked box against Lupe Thorne!—but solely for his, Jim's benefit. He had refused to rise to the first bait, the invitation to set in the game. But he was being offered another, just as tempting, and there were a dozen men watching him narrowly to see whether or not he would take it.

He chose to take it—instantly.

"Say, mister, just what's the idea of swappin' boxes under the table?" he drawled quietly. And, in the sudden, pregnant hush that fell upon the room, his level, lazy voice seemed to carry like a trumpet call. "Mind tellin' me?"

The gambler's head turned toward him as on a pivot, with no movement of body or limbs.

"What d'yuh mean, swappin' boxes? I didn't—"

"That'll do," Jim cut him short. "That's all I wanted to know. A man might shift boxes an' have an honest reason for doin' it, though it's damned unlikely. But when he does it an' denies it, then his reason ain't honest—an' neither is he! Now, don't argue about it," he added icily, as the dealer started to speak. "I'm givin' yuh fifteen minutes an' no more to get out of Roaring Gap. Pull yuhr freight!"

Squint Bishop bounced suddenly upright in his chair.

"What the damnation blazes are yuh talkin' about, feller?" he demanded. "Duke Gifford's as honest a gambler as ever shuffled a deck! An' yuh're accusin' him of bein' crooked. Why, blast yuhr stinkin' soul, for two bits I'd show yuh where to head in at, yuh misbegotten—"

"Easy there, Bishop," Jim advised him gently. "Before yuh start callin' me names, yuh best go borrow a gun in place of the one I took away from yuh this afternoon. Then I can talk back to yuh on even terms. Gifford, yuh heard me give yuh fifteen minutes to pull yuhr freight. Commence!"

None of the men about the table seemed disposed to say anything. Tense and alert they sat, watching. As if by common consent, they left the argument with the deputy to Squint Bishop, who was unarmed and therefore safe. His face red and working oddly, the latter thrust his head forward, hunching up his chunky shoulders.

"I don't need no gun to talk to you!" he bawled. "Who the hell do yuh think yuh are, givin' orders round here? What license yuh got to come hornin' in, I want to know? I say"—his voice rising shrilly—"I say, who the hell do yuh think yuh—"

"I heard yuh the first time, Bishop," Jim told him coldly. "I'm wearin' two licenses that talk a language easy understood anywheres, an' another yuh've mebbe heard tell about to back 'em up. As deputy sheriff of this county, one of my jobs is to see to it that

this place is run on the level, an' it's so goin' to be, from now on. The crooks are all hittin' the out-trail, an' Gifford's headin' the procession."

He paused, his face as inscrutable as that of a bronze statue, his lips grim and set. "It's likely news to you an' yuhr crooked gang, Bishop," he said, "but the law's come to Roaring Gap!"

"The hell with the law, an' with you, too!" Squint Bishop lunged to his feet, overturning his chair with a crash. "Why, yuh lousy, lyin' sidewinder—"

The shattering roar of one of Jim Lorimer's big forty-fives drowned out the rest of that speech. A streak of orange-red flame stabbed venomously from the weapon's muzzle, like a fiery sword blade. But it was not aimed at Bishop! From the very first, Jim had known that the threats and ranting of the loud-mouthed brawler were but a cunning subterfuge to attract his attention and hold it away from the real source of danger. He had answered Bishop, had appeared to be watching him alone, but not for one instant had he been caught napping.

With the roar of the report, Lupe Thorne all at once leaped to his full height, as if jerked upward by invisible hands, screamed, and then plunged face downward across the blood-spattered green cloth. His head fell between his extended arms, one thumb still moving a little, feebly groping, as though even in death he sought to raise the hammer of the gun which he had drawn but had not been quick enough to fire.

There was a breathless hush that was no more than the length of a heartbeat. Then a concerted shout of fury arose that seemed to shake the rafters, as guns leaped from their scabbards and a very hail of bullets beat upon the wall where, a split second before, Jim Lorimer's tall figure had been darkly silhouetted, a perfect target against the dirty gray-white of the adobe.

But it was no longer there. The instant that the flip of his thumb upon the hammer had sped the leaden messenger of doom to Lupe Thorne, the killer, he had dropped down flat behind the table. Now both the ivory-handled forty-fives were vomiting flame and death into the ranks of the desperadoes crouching along the edge of the dance floor.

The table itself was no protection to him; the heavy-calibered bullets went through it as if it had been so much stretched tissue paper. But the shadow it cast made it impossible for his enemies to see him. They knew that he must be there somewhere. But while they were firing at random along the eight or so feet of the darkened space, the deadly staccato from those two blazing muzzles drummed back at those who were in the full light of the lamps.

A blond-haired giant cursed thickly through the blood that surged up in his throat, and stumbled to a chair, from which he was never to rise again. With an ear-splitting screech, a burly teamster flung his arms aloft and staggered backward, to fall in a limp huddle across the body of a Bolton puncher who had blotched his last brand.

A bullet struck the barrel of a leveled revolver, smashed the wrist of the man aiming it, and ricocheted off at an angle, to gouge out the eyeball of a swaggering young bully, little more than a boy, who held a silver-mounted six-gun in either hand.

The sudden searing agony that scorched his brain crazed him. Shriek after shriek issued from his writhing lips. He spun like a demented top, his face a dreadful, sightless mask of blood and shredded flesh, both his guns blazing in any and every direction as fast as he could pull the triggers.

It was the last, the intolerable straw for the desperadoes—those of them who were left. Stark panic seized them. Yelling and cursing, they stam-

peded for the door, striking right and left with guns or fists, trampling one another in their headlong flight for the street and safety. Those few members of the crowd who had not scattered and fled like frightened sheep at the first shot were swept irresistibly before them in their blind, desperate rush to get away.

In less than half a minute, the big, square room was empty, save for the cowering Mexican behind the oar, and some half a dozen motionless forms. All but one of these would leave the Here's How only when they were carried out, feet first, on a shutter or swung in a blanket. That one, the gambler, Duke Gifford, still sat in the dealer's chair at the head of the faro table, his glassy eyes staring straight before him at the sprawled body of Thorne, his lips as white as the starched shirt front between his coat lapels.

From the shadows beyond him, a tall figure rose slowly and stood looking out with grim blue eyes through the undulating veils of powder smoke at the wreckage of the room. Chairs were broken, tables overturned. Cards and chips and gold and silver coins littered the sawdust-strewn floor, from which came the raw, sickening smell of fresh blood. A row of bottles on the shelf behind the bar had been smashed to fragments, and the long mirror was cracked from end to end.

Without turning his head, Lorimer addressed the gambler, his voice level and low and expressionless.

"They's three minutes of yuhr fifteen gone already, Gifford," he said.

CHAPTER XII

Jim Coppers Another Bet

THE covert insolence in the manner of the Mexican behind the bar had been replaced by an almost cringing deference. The cold sweat of terror was still glistening wet on his greasy, pock-marked face, and the dark swarthiness of his skin seemed to have bleached out until it was a pale and sickly brown.

Jim wasted no words on him.

"I'm closin' yuh up, barkeep. When this joint's let to open for business again, if a-tall, is something for the sheriff to settle. But it won't be tonight. Go close those doors!"

Without a word, the man scuttled to obey the order, and Jim turned to Squint Bishop who was sidling rather uncertainly toward him along the bar. The latter had recovered sufficient courage to emerge from his retreat in the rear passage, where a stairway led up to the rooms on the second floor.

"And as for you, yuh ten-cent imitation of a badman," Jim said, "vamose —an' make it snappy, before I forget how plumb filthy yuh are an' dirty the toe of my boot kickin' yuh out. From now on, I'm runnin' this town, understand? The Bolton gang is through. You fog along an' hand that to yuhr boss, from Smilin' Jim Lorimer!"

"If yuh're meanin' Sam Bolton, he ain't my boss," declared Bishop sulkily. "Not any more, he ain't. I've quit him for good an' all. I ain't got no use for double-crossers."

"No?" Jim was contemptuously amused at the vehemence of the pot denouncing the color of the kettle. "Yuh haven't?"

"No. An' I ain't the only one, neither. If Sam had been on the square with us fellers, we'd have stuck by him until hell froze over. But after the lousy trick he played us here tonight, he's goin' to find out he's got mighty few friends left in Roarin' Gap, Lorimer—mighty few."

"He's sure got some considerable fewer than he had before you tried to fix it up with Lupe Thorne to plug me while yuh thought I wasn't lookin'," commented Jim dryly. "An' if I find yuh're still in town to-morrow mornin', he'll have one less yet!"

"Didn't I tell yuh I wasn't no friend of his?" Squint protested, with some

show of heat. "I wished I had the chance right now, I'd show yuh what I think of the skunk! Why, do you reckon for one minute, Lorimer, that if any of us had suspicioned who we was goin' up against, we'd have made that play? Not on yuhr life we wouldn't. An' Sam knowed it, so he didn't tell us, damn him! No—he lines dang near the whole bunch up in front of yuhr guns, but he takes mighty good care to keep his own hide whole, yuh noticed! We run all the risks—"

"Yeah—you especial," Jim remarked. "Or was it a foot race yuh run, mebbe, when Lupe missed me? You fog along now an' sing yuhr blues to somebody who's interested in that kind of music, Bishop. All I want to listen to is the sound of yuhr feet travelin' away from here."

"Well, I dunno as I blame yuh much, Lorimer. It must have looked like a pretty low-down way to serve yuh. But we didn't rightly understand, like I said I didn't, anyways. Sam lied to me, an' I ain't goin' to forget about it in a hurry, neither. I always thought he was a square-shooter with his own crowd, but I know different now.

"An' there's another thing." Bishop glanced hurriedly around as if to make sure that the Mexican was out of earshot, and edged a step closer, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper. "An' there's another thing, Lorimer—about that little Lou Wentworth gal. I ain't no tin saint, not by a damn sight; but I draw the line when it comes to stealin' women!"

"Not hawsses—just women," observed Jim. "Pity yuh didn't draw that line a mite earlier in the day, Bishop!"

"Well, I didn't know what it was all about. All I heard was that yuh'd tangled with Lafe Crosby an' Dropper on account of Lou. An' just to show yuh that I'm on the level with yuh. I'll tell yuh—Sam's got her upstairs right now!"

For a second, Lorimer didn't understand. Then, as the import of Bishop's words dawned on him, his anger flared.

"Oh, yeah?" he drawled. "Went over to her ranch an' fetched her away himself, did he?"

"No. He sent Lafe an' Jeff Slade to O'Brien's for her, 'bout half an hour ago, an' they brought her back. Sam was figurin' on Thorne fixin' yuhr clock, o' course, an'—"

"An' when I coppered that bet, he sent you to lay another, did he? Odds that I'd jump for them stairs yuh just come down, an' get sieved proper, huh? How many guns yuh got planted up there for me to waltz into?"

"Honest to Gawd, Lorimer, I—"

But that was as far as he got. Jim Lorimer had never had a great deal of patience with sneaks, and what little he did possess had already been strained to the snapping point.

Out shot his fist, with all the strength of his powerful back and shoulder muscles behind it. The blow caught Bishop squarely on the point of the jaw, and stretched him full length, flat on his back in the dirty sawdust.

Jim stepped over him, strode to the door.

"Yuh're stayin' here until the sheriff shows up," he told the trembling Mexican curtly. "An' remember, nobody comes in. Don't try to put nothin' over on me because I'll be right where I can spot it, sabe?"

It had been his intention to remain in the saloon to await McMahon's arrival. If the latter had not heard the lid blow off, somebody had certainly been to tell him about it by this time, and he shortly would put in an appearance.

But Squint Bishop had given Jim an idea. The outlaw's hymn of hate had sounded off key from the start, and Jim had put no stock whatever in it. He didn't for a minute believe that Crosby and Slade or any other of Sam Bolton's emissaries had kidnaped Louise, or that the girl was

anywhere but asleep behind a safely bolted door at Ma O'Brien's.

The story of Louise being held a prisoner in the rooms over the saloon was too absurd for credence. It was just another bait, hastily concocted after the Lupe Thorne fiasco, and thrust out in the hope that he would swallow it and rush blinded into the ambush prepared for him in the darkness of the stairway.

However, if Louise wasn't in the upper part of the building, Sam Bolton was! When he and his men were lying in wait, ready to pour a rain of bullets from the landing, it would be an ideal opportunity to execute a flank movement, and turn the tables on them.

Since there was only one stairway, reached by a door opening from the side alley and also from the passage at the rear of the barroom, the scheme might have seemed, on the face of it, to present insurmountable difficulties. But Jim did not regard them as such. Given about five minutes, he thought he could guarantee to hand Mister Sam Bolton a surprise!

But haste was imperative; because as soon as Squint Bishop recovered from that haymaker, and reported that the new bait had failed to get a rise, the opportunity would be gone. He'd have to move quickly if his plan were to go through before anybody suspected what he was up to.

Accordingly, the instant that the door swung shut behind him, Jim darted along the front of the building, keeping close in its shadow, until he reached the hitch-rack. He snatched a lariat from the saddle of one of the ponies drowsing there, backed away, and dodged into the opening between the Here's How and the adjoining feed store, which had a comparatively low, flat roof behind its towering false front.

The opening was very narrow; indeed, there was just about enough space separating the two walls for Jim to squeeze through. And an indiscriminate litter of broken bottles, rusty tin cans, and other discarded rubbish made a noiseless progress none too easy.

However, he managed to avoid making any considerable racket as he felt his way along to the back of the feed store. Here, a low, rickety lean-to sagged precariously. However, one of its supporting posts proved strong enough to bear his weight, and he swarmed up it like a small boy up a tree trunk.

From the roof of the lean-to, it was possible for him to touch the edge of the feed store roof. He reached up as far as he could, hooked his fingers over the cornice, and chinned himself. Then he flung a leg over and presently was standing erect, looking at the wall of the saloon building.

There were no windows in it on that side; the adobe rose blank and bare, affording neither foot nor finger hold. But, near the back, a chimney thrust a short, dark throat up into the air. This was an ideal peg from which to suspend a ladder. And to a man who had spent his whole life on the open range, a lariat was as good as a ladder any day in the week.

Only, he mustn't miss his first cast. If he fell short or overshot his mark, the rattle and slap of the hemp falling on the roof would probably make noise enough to be heard inside. Somebody might come out to investigate what was going on. He took his time, coiling the reata with meticulous care, measuring the distance accurately with his eye.

"Well, here she goes!" he muttered to himself. "One, two, three—and out!" There was a soft, sibilant hiss as, like a slim serpent striking, the rope darted from his hand. Then a faint thud, and a slight scraping sound as the noose settled into place around the stack.

"Not bad a-tall, Jim, old-timer; not a-tall. Was Santa Claus to start him a rodeo, yuh might mebbe get a job ropin' his chimneys for him! Well,

now, let's see if we guessed right." He gave a quick jerk on the rope, then a long, steady pull, testing his "peg." It would hold, all right; no danger of its toppling over and letting him down with it!

It wasn't more than a couple of minutes since he had left the barroom. Squint Bishop couldn't have gotten over that haymaker yet, and the gang would be watching the stairway. He took a firm grip on the rope, swung himself lightly into the air, and went up, hand over hand. In less time than it takes to tell it, he was able to shift his hold from the improvised ladder to the cornice over which it hung. In another instant, a bit out of breath, but grimly triumphant, he had achieved the flat roof of the saloon.

Almost directly in front of him loomed the squat, dark bulk of the chimney. A few yards to the left of it, a still more squat mound, rectangular in shape, marked the position of the thing he had hoped to find there. A trapdoor above the second floor! Most buildings of the kind had such doors, for purposes of ventilation, and he had confidently expected that the saloon would prove no exception to the rule. Whether it was cut in the ceiling of the hallway or of one of the rooms, he didn't know; but the best way to find out was to go and look.

He tiptoed softly across the dusty tar paper that covered the roof, silent as a shadow, alert and watchful as a panther stalking its prey. A few feet from his goal he stopped, froze into a tensely listening statue, only his eyes alive. A bar of wanly yellow light showed where the trap had been raised a few inches and propped into place with a short stick. Faintly to his ears came the subdued murmur of voices.

Good! Some one of the gang was right under him, anyway; and that someone was due for a big surprise. He hoped that it was Sam Bolton, though that would be almost too much good luck to expect.

Chuckling to himself, Jim noiselessly dropped to his hands and knees, crawled cautiously across the intervening space. Lying flat on his stomach, he peered down through the narrow aperture, into the room below.

But the first surprise, at least, was not for the man whose voice he had heard there. It was for Jim Lorimer himself, and the shock of it made him catch his breath as if he had been plunged suddenly over his head into freezing water.

For the first thing his eyes rested on was the pale, frightened face of Louise Wentworth!

One sleeve of the girl's dress had been ripped completely away, leaving her slender arm bare to the shoulder. Her hair was disheveled, and a fleck of scarlet at the corners of her mouth, a thin, red weal, starting vivid against the pallor of her cheeks, showed where the ties of a gag had pressed painfully into the tender flesh. She was half kneeling, half crouching, by a chair, clutching the arm of it with both hands. Her eyes looked like those of some helpless, hunted creature at bay.

Beyond her, ear to the closed door, his evil, covetous gaze turned on her over his shoulder, was Sam Bolton.

CHAPTER XIII

The Last Trick

So much Jim Lorimer saw in that first glance, while his blood seemed to congeal to ice and then suddenly pour through his veins in a boiling torrent. Bewildered, confused thoughts flickered across his mind like lightning flashes across a sky. How she had come there . . . when . . . what. . . . A savage impulse seized him to shoot down that leering satyr whose very look outraged her—shoot him down without mercy, as one would a mad wolf!

But, almost before he had fully re-

alized that his eyes were not deceiving him, that Louise Wentworth was really there, Bolton jerked the door open, and Lafe Crosby limped into the room.

He was followed by Slade, whom Jim had not seen before, Beef Weller, arm in a sling and swathed in bandages, and Squint Bishop, blinking and still half-dazed, his aching jaw cupped in his palm. In the rear hovered Three-Spot Kelly, a bloody handkerchief bound about his head.

"Well, what the hell's the procession for?" Bolton snarled angrily. "Why ain't yuh on the job, huh?"

"'Cause they ain't no job to be on, Sam," Bishop mumbled. "The cuss wouldn't believe me when I told him the gal was here. Hauled off an' clipped me aside the jaw. Put me out, cold. I come to tell yuh soon's I woke up. Gawd! I feel like I'd been kicked in the face by a mule!"

"Pity yuh hadn't been!" Bolton rasped at him. "Yuh mean yuh let Lorimer get away again? Damn yuh! Yuh bungled it somehow, like yuh bungled the other, or he'd have been up here a-whoopin'!"

"Honest, I didn't, Sam. I done just like yuh said—told him we was all sore at yuh, an' everything. An' all he done was sock me. Gawd! I feel—"

"I say yuh did bungle it!" bawled Bolton, his face purpling. "I say yuh did bungle it, yuh hear me? Yuh contradict me once more, an' yuh won't feel *nothin'!* He'd 've come, all right, if yuh'd put it to him that the girl was here, unwillin', the way I told yuh."

Bishop, still nursing his jaw, tried to shake his head, and groaned dismally with the effort.

"He wouldn't believe it. Said I was lyin'."

"Wouldn't believe it? Wouldn't believe she was here?"

"No. I tried to convince him, an he just—"

"Where's he now?"

"I dunno Round somewheres, I reckon. He told Miguel he was a-goin' outside to wait for McMahon. But Miguel watched, an' says he didn't go near the alley door."

A gleam came into Bolton's beady little black eyes.

"Oh, he didn't, huh? Well, I wouldn't wonder if I can mebbe fix it so's he will! Get along back there where yuh belong, all of yuh. Watch them stairs! If he's round outside, he'll be comin' round inside in one hell of a hurry!" He gestured them peremptorily to the door.

"But if he don't believe—" Jeff Slade was beginning, when Bolton rounded on him viciously.

"Damn yuh, Slade! Obey orders, will yuh? He'll believe it, all right. Yuh leave that to me. Dust!"

The four dusted, and Bolton closed the door behind them, crossed the room, and threw open a window. He was grinning widely again, as he turned and beckoned to the girl.

"Come on over here a minute, will yuh, Lou?"

"No." The monosyllable fell from the girl's lips like a stone dropping. It had the same flat, final quality.

"I say yes. Yuh ain't goin' to be hurt. Nobody's hurt yuh yet, have they? If yuh'd kept still an' done like yuh was told, yuh wouldn't have got yuhr dress tore, neither. Come on, now, an' call to yuhr boy friend. He wants to know where yuh are. Come stick yuhr head outa the window an' tell him."

"No." She was standing up straight now, very pale, very quiet and determined. "I will not. You want me to call him, so that your four hired killers out there in the dark can murder him when he comes in. I won't do it. I'll die first."

"You ain't goin' to die, Lou; don't yuh worry none about that. A dead woman ain't much use to nobody except the undertaker, an' I'm figurin' on havin' yuh keepin' house for me up to the Long Diamond."

She was silent, not looking at him.

He struck the frame of the window impatiently with his fist.

"No," he said, "yuh ain't goin' to die; but yuh are goin' to call to Jim Lorimer, understand? If he was to stub his toe an' fall comin' upstairs in the dark"—the evil, leering grin widened, until it showed his yellow, tobacco-stained teeth—"why, it wouldn't be no fault of yuhrs, none a-tall."

"It's my fault that he ever got mixed up with your gang, in the first place; and my fault again that I'm here. If I'd done as he told me, I'd be safe at Ma O'Brien's."

"Not meanin' yuh don't think yuh're safe here, Lou?" he mocked her. "An' me the man yuh're goin' to marry? Why, girl, yuh sure do astonish me! Not safe with me to look after yuh? My, my!" All at once, his tone changed threateningly. "Come on, now; quit yuhr stallin' an' come over here!"

"I won't. I'm not stalling. If you manage to murder Jim Lorimer, it'll be without my help. I mean it."

He was beginning to realize that she did, and his face darkened with his rising anger.

"Yuh're goin' to do as I tell yuh, Lou Wentworth, an' yuh're goin' to do it now, sabe?" he told her between his teeth. "March over here to the window, or I'll drag yuh over!"

She shook her head. She was white to the lips; her knees were shaking under her so that she could scarcely stand. But her small golden head was held proudly erect, and her eyes were clear and steadily defiant.

"No; I will not," she said in a little low voice. "I will not. You're stronger than I am, but you can't make me call out of that window, Sam Bolton! You can't make me scream for help. Do you understand that? You can't! And if you touch me again, I'll kill you—unless you kill me first!"

He stared at her for a moment, scowling, furious, his little bloodshot eyes black and beady, like a snake's eyes, in his fleshy, congested face. Then he laughed, his big shoulders shaking.

"One thing outa all that line o' palaver yuh got right, Lou," he sneered. "I sure am stronger than you are—at least, I reckon I am! We'll just see. Likewise, whiles we're about it, we'll just find out how loud yuh can yell."

Like some big, lumbering beast, sure of its victim, he started toward her. To the very bottom of her soul, she was sick with horror and loathing and the cold, shuddering terror that is like no other terror on earth. But she did not retreat. She did not give ground an inch. He could beat her. He could torture her. He could kill her. But she would not cry out. She would not scream. She would not, to save herself, help him to murder Jim Lorimer.

Her knees had stopped trembling. She stood very straight and very still.

Bolton had nearly reached her. He was stretching out his great, hairy hand to seize her by the shoulder.

There was a slight noise overhead, but neither of them heard it. It was caused by the trapdoor, creaking faintly on its hinges as Jim Lorimer wrenched it back. He rested his palm on the edge of the opening, and vaulted lightly downward into the room, landing on his feet like a cat, and almost as softly as a cat.

"Bolton!" Softly, too, barely above a whisper, he spoke the name; but even as his low, level voice had seemed to vibrate across the hush of the crowded barroom downstairs, so now it seemed to ring, clarion-like, through the stark silence of the room.

It arrested Sam Bolton's hand in midair, spun him about, open-mouthed and staring. His big, hulking body stiffened as if an electric current had been passed through it. The thought of the trapdoor had never once crossed his mind. It must have seemed to him that his enemy had materialized out of the air.

"Quiet, Bolton. Don't make any

noise. If yuh call yuhr pals, by the time they get here yuh'll be—gone!"

It was the first idea that had occurred to Bolton, of course; to summon Lafe Crosby and the others from the landing. But the shout that he had been on the verge of uttering died away soundlessly in his throat. He stood rigid, frozen in his tracks, while the blood slowly ebbed from his face, leaving it drawn and ghastly.

"Yuh was wantin' to see me, wasn't yuh, Bolton? Well, I'm here," the drawling, deadly voice purred. "Yuh was so certain sure yuh could fetch me in, looks like yuh were right. If yuh want a thing well done, do it yuhrself—'specially if it's a killin'. See how Bishop an' Thorne an' them mussed it all up for yuh when yuh was packin' a perfectly good gun an' knew how to use it. Yuh do know how to use a gun, don't yuh, Bolton?"

Jim had drawn neither of his own weapons. There was no need. Nevertheless, he meant to kill the man who had dared to lay hands on Louise Wentworth, and Bolton knew it. Given the choice, the Long Diamond man would sooner have faced an angry panther in its native jungle than this grim, implacable figure with the hard, straight mouth and the cold, still, ruthless eyes. Only, he had not been given the choice.

He tried to speak, but his tongue refused its office; only a queer, unintelligible mumble came from his stiff lips.

"Or mebbe the things yuh know best about is blotchin' brands an' runnin' crooked dives, an' mistreatin' women? Where I come from, the folks 'ud have given yuh a ladder to climb up on, so's yuh'd be able to look at a crawlin' snake on its own level. Or mebbe so they'd have picked the top of an ant hill instead. They might even have found some name they could call yuh that would fit. But I been away so long now, I disremember what it might be an' I won't waste yuhr time thinkin' it up. Yuh haven't got so much time left, Bolton—only just about long enough to reach for yuhr gun."

Bolton didn't reach for it, although it was in an open holster swung at his hip. He knew that if he did, it would be the last move he would ever make. Again he tried to speak, and again he failed. He tried to look away from those still, cold eyes that seemed to be boring into his brain—and he could not do that, either. A sort of shuddering seized him, shaking him from head to foot. Death, swift and terrible, was staring him in the face, and there was nothing he could do—nothing.

"Yuh've turned out all yuhr little bag of crooked tricks, Bolton. Yuh've cheated an' robbed an' burned an' murdered, an' it got yuh quite a lot. It made yuh boss of Roaring Gap. But this here last trick's got yuh something else again. That's a chance to be on the level, for once; to do yuhr own dirty work, or else take what yuh've handed out to other men who took yuhr orders. Yuh wanted to get me up here to kill me. All right; I'm here. Yuh've got yuhr chance. Draw!"

"I—I—"

"Draw, Bolton! I'm countin' three. If yuhr gun ain't out before then, I'm goin' to shoot yuh anyway, like the murderin' beast yuh are. One. . . ."

Bolton's mouth worked convulsively. Little trickles of saliva oozed from his mouth and ran down over his flabby chin. His beady, bloodshot eyes slid and shifted from side to side like the eyes of a cornered rat.

"Two. . . ."

With a wild shriek, he grabbed at last for his gun. It cleared the holster—and thudded to the floor beside his sagging body as the thunder of Jim's shot crashed out.

Hard on its echoes sounded the tramp of hurrying feet outside in the hall. Lorimer swept Louise out of the way, flung the door wide. His voice cracked like a whip.

"Stick 'em up!"

The desperadoes would have done

well to obey. But their weapons were in their hands, ready for action. The leaders chanced it. Lafe Crosby, the foremost, went down in a heap across the doorsill. Jeff Slade plunged headlong across him into the room, dead before he touched the floor.

Weller and Squint Bishop turned and fled. Down the stairs they clattered, running as only men pursued by the nameless terror of death can run. Out into the darkness of the alley, cursing and blaspheming, expecting every instant to be overtaken by a bullet from behind. But instead, there was someone in front!

"Stop, there!" a big voice boomed at them from the gloom. "Stop an' put yuhr hands up, blast yuh, or I'll fill yuh both full of lead!"

Upstairs, in Sam Bolton's "cute little burrow," Jim Lorimer heard it, and knew that the sheriff had arrived. He holstered his gun, stepped over Jeff Slade's body to the doorway.

"Hi, there, McMahon!" he called. "Just put them two birds in yuhr cage, will yuh? They're all that's left of the flock. I'm up here—all okay."

"I'll do that, Jim!" the sheriff shouted back. "I got four good fellers here to help me, if I need 'em. Yuh comin' down?"

"Yeah; pretty soon." Jim stooped, dragged Lafe Crosby's body clear of the doorway. Then he lifted Louise in his arms and carried her into the hall. "Can yuh walk, Lou?" he asked her anxiously. "Yuh ain't hurt, are yuh, sweetheart? That devil didn't—"

The golden head against his shoulder moved in faint negation. Her shaken whisper came to him on a sobbing, indrawn breath. He could feel the flutter of her heart close to his own.

"Oh, Jim—I—I can do anything, now that I know you're safe. If—if—"

"Lou, girl, there ain't any 'if' about it. It's all over, an' yuh're safe. Yuh're goin' back to Ma O'Brien's now, an' I'm goin' along to look after yuh. The rest of this job will keep until to-morrow, when I've got less on my mind. Right this minute— Look at me, Lou!"

There were tears on the cheek he pressed against his cheek; the soft, sweet lips that he kissed were quivering. But through the mist of her tears, he saw the light shining in her eyes—the light that, he knew, would always shine there for him and for him alone.

CHAPTER XIV

The Dream Trail

PULLING his new cream-colored Stetson down over his eyes to shield them from the slanting shafts of the mid-afternoon sun, Jim Lorimer stepped out through the doorway of the telegraph office into the hot, bright glare of Roaring Gap's main street. He was whistling a plaintive little refrain as he sauntered across the wooden sidewalk toward Windy Day, standing in the narrow strip of shade cast by the high false front of the Paramount Pool Palace.

An eager nicker from the stallion greeted the sound of his step on the boards, and he stopped so abruptly that a white-haired rancher, hastening out of the barber shop, almost ran over him.

"Excuse me, Mister Lorimer," the old man apologized; "but I saw yuh goin' by, an' I just wanted to ask yuh if it's true what I heard about yuhr decidin' to settle down here—permanent, that is."

Jim nodded pleasantly, pulling off his sombrero to run his fingers through his crisp wavy brown hair. His brown leather vest was new, and so were his flannel shirt and breeches. His scarlet silk neckerchief was spotless, and most carefully tied, and he was wearing only one gun.

He looked as though he had never known a care or worry in the world. His mouth was whimsically up-quirked at the corners, and his blue eyes were frank and friendly. There was a curious, lambent glow in their depths, as if a clear flame had been lighted behind them.

"Sure is, Mister Thomas," he said. "Yuh heard right."

"Good!" exclaimed the rancher enthusiastically. "I want to tell yuh, that's the best news I've had in a long time. Roarin' Gap's been needin' one of yuhr breed to make it fit for humans to live in. Not meanin' to be nosey, Mr. Lorimer," he added, "but are yuh fixin' to buy up the Long Diamond, mebbe? I hear it'll go mighty cheap at the auction."

Jim allowed Windy Day to secure the lump of sugar he had concealed in his palm, and affectionately stroked the satin-smooth neck that rubbed against him.

"No, I wasn't figurin' on doin' that exactly, Mister Thomas, though they's a couple or three pure-bred bulls I'm aimin' to bid on. Yuh see, I ain't buyin' a ranch; I married one, just about half an hour ago. Yuh can't see it, mebbe, but right now me an' this Windy Day hawss are packin' the Flying W brand!"

"Good!" exclaimed the rancher again. "That's the best news I've had since—well, since yuh said yuh was goin' to settle here! Congratulations, Mister Lorimer! Yuh've got the finest little girl in seven counties—nor she ain't got the worst of the deal, either! I'd admire to shake yuhr hand, sir!"

When the old man had gone on his way, Jim leaned against the rail of the hitch-rack and rolled himself a brown paper cigarette, letting his gaze rove expectantly up and down the dusty length of the street. Toward the upper end, a dingy adobe building with a large, paint-blistered sign proclaiming that it was the Here's How, Saloon and Dance Hall Supreme, had its broken windows boarded up fast. It was plastered with "For Sale—to Responsible Parties Only" posters. There was only one cow-pony tied to its hitch-rack, and that belonged to a puncher who, from sheer force of habit, had left it there while he assuaged his thirst at a less familiar bar.

"Seems like she don't roar quite so loud now as she did the day we blew in here, huh?" Jim remarked, half to himself. "It ain't such a bad little town, is it, Windy? I'd rather be here than in plenty places I can think of. Ought to grow, too."

He scratched a match, thoughtlessly, on the seat of the new breeches, and lighted his cigarette. Over the top of the tiny flame, his eyes sought the upper end of the street again.

A rapidly moving cloud of dust approaching from the direction of the post office resolved itself into a clean-limbed bay gelding, ridden by a girl about whose small, proudly carried head the sun made a misty golden aureole. She waved a gloved hand to Lorimer, who gathered up his reins and swung to saddle.

"All ready, Jim?"

"I been ready an hour, Lou. What kept yuh so long?"

"Sticking a stamp on an envelope," she laughed. "That's all I did, and it took me exactly half a minute."

"Well, it seemed like an hour, anyways. I thought mebbe yuh'd changed yuhr mind about wantin' me, an' run off."

"And if I had run off, what would you have done?"

"High-tailed it after yuh an' fetched yuh back"—promptly. "Yuh've got a boss now, an' don't yuh forget it, Mrs. Lorimer! Like yuhr new name, do yuh?"

She flushed and smiled at him—answer enough. He reined Windy Day up close beside her. Together, they left the huddle of dingy buildings behind them and rode out across the open prairie.

Then they followed a deeply rutted wagon track that presently left the level, and, dwindling to a grass-grown trail, pursued a leisurely way between sloping hillsides toward a line of low, undulating ridges tumbling against the far, deep blue of the horizon.

Coyote Color

By James W. Routh

Who was going to show coyote color in the showdown? Was it brash Bill Stanton who tried to crash the gates of May's proud heart, or the man who seemed to have the right of way with her? Sooner or later the stern West country would put these two to the test and May would know her man by his actions in that soul-rending moment when both good and bad must come to light.

BILL STANTON, a reckless light in his gray eyes, his peaked hat tilted rakishly, paused near the open doorway and observed the dancers inside the Twin Peaks schoolhouse. Time was when Bill had been a regular attendant at those weekly affairs. Now, having returned after an absence of several months, he was open-minded on the proposition of horning in and giving the home folks a treat.

"Mebbe I owe it to the gals not to disappoint 'em," he meditated.

Beside him, dwarfed by his superior height and width, Slim Collins snorted.

"Still hate yuhrself, huh? Folks hereabouts has managed to survive during yuhr absence, yuh might note."

Bill's drawl was undisturbed. "Shore! But I reckon the gals has just been livin' in hopes, Slim. It ain't right to make 'em wait no more. The way I see it—"

"Which is cock-eyed," asserted Slim, with the frankness of an old friend. "Yuh better come with me an' try poker, yuh fathead."

"Who's a cock-eyed fathead?" demanded Bill, with righteous warmth. "Say, yuh wart, I go where I please, sabe? An' the gals— My gosh!"

Long brown fingers closed suddenly on Slim's arm with the force of a steel wolf trap. The little puncher squirmed and swore.

"Leggo, damn yuh! Say, I aim to

use that arm some more, yuh muddle-headed idjut!"

"Did yuh see her?" breathed Bill ecstatically. "My gosh, Slim, have yuh been holdin' out on me, yuh—"

Slim jerked loose. "Seein' things, now, are yuh? Huh! Where'd yuh get it, cowboy? Reckon it's you that's been holdin' out."

Bill, looking like a man in a trance, raved on softly: "Hair like real gold—eyes like dark pools in a canyon stream—mouth—"

"Mostly they has mouths," snorted Slim disgustedly. "Ain't yuh noticed it before, yuh dumb egg? An' accordin' to what I see, eyes is pretty much eyes. Same with hair. Now if yuh find a gal without no hair, mouth or eyes, why yuh might—"

"Quit holdin' me!" muttered Bill, giving the little puncher a shove. "Quit holdin' me, dang yuh!"

Chiefly interested in not being held himself, Slim was properly wroth.

"Who's holdin' who? I wouldn't—Say, where yuh goin'? Hey, Bill, yuh can't—"

But Bill, deaf to all protest, blind to all but the memory of the face which had flashed before his eyes strode purposefully towards the schoolhouse door. There he was confronted by two grim-faced gentlemen who regarded him unkindly. He did not notice them.

Eagerly he scanned the throng of dancers, now making their several ways off the floor as the music ceased; more than unkind looks were required to distract him. All at once he started forward impetuously, collided with a substantial body, felt rough hands grasp him, heard a voice speak warningly.

"Can't do it, cowboy. Yuh oughta know better. Them guns—"

"Huh?" Bill stopped perforce. His gaze focused upon the other man with frank disapproval. "Since when has these here dances been so damn private?"

He shoved, and the guardian of the door, a man he did not know, moved backward. The second gentlemen, whom Bill did recognize, exclaimed:

"Why, it's Bill Stanton! Hello, Bill! When did yuh blow in?"

Bill kept pushing; the man who opposed him kept moving. Ed Peters grabbed Bill's arm.

"Leggo, Ed," Bill warned mildly. "I got a date inside."

"Not with them guns," objected Peters. "There's a new— Ugh!"

Bill, ever impatient against restraint, abruptly employed both hands. The obstacles to his progress found themselves somewhat scattered, while he proceeded serenely on his course.

The girl with pale golden hair and eyes like deep still pools was entirely surrounded by a shoving mass of eager men, each clamoring for the next dance. As Bill reached the outer rim of the circle the orchestra struck up, and the lady turned, with a bewitching smile, towards a stalwart cowboy, who promptly reddened and flashed a triumphant look at the disappointed ones.

"Too bad, gents," he exulted. "But this is my dance!"

Bill emerged through the crowd. "Yuh're plumb wrong, Lizard," he drawled easily. "It's mine!"

And then, before any resistance could be organized, he proceeded, with a sort of sublime cocksureness, to make good his statement. Just how it was done is immaterial; none of the witnesses could afterwards agree on it. But he got away with it, as he invariably did. His arm firmly enfolded the waist of the girl whose name he had yet to learn, and he swung skilfully out amongst the dancers. The lady regarded him with surprised disapproval, with which amusement was mingled.

"I didn't give you this dance!"

Her voice was cool, but Bill caught a brief glimpse of a dimple at the corner of her mouth.

"But yuh're dancin' with me." He smiled serenely.

They completed two turns and a glide. The girl's grave eyes remained on his reckless, handsome face.

"I don't believe I like your brand of freshness, Mister Cowboy. And I don't take kindly to being kidnaped. Suppose you think that over—quickly."

Bill tightened his arm about her waist.

"I'm likely to kidnap yuh for keeps! Think that over, ma'am!"

Other couples bumped into them. Bill was moved to further recklessness.

"Mebbe yuh'd rather sit outside," he suggested brazenly, "where we can get acquainted faster. Yuh're bound to like me, ma'am. Let's get real sociable!"

Suddenly she stood free of him. The flash of her dark eyes, the sharp edge of her quiet voice, warned him too late.

"I suppose you count yourself a fast worker, cowboy, and irresistible. Well, this is once you don't get away with it! I don't like you. I don't like anything about you. You're just a big, conceited windbag who thinks himself a lady-killer. I don't intend to dance with you—and I don't want to know you!"

"My gosh!" gasped Bill, his face crimson. "Yuh've got me all wrong, ma'am! I—I—"

"You're no gentleman," said the lady firmly, "or you'd not come to a respectable dance wearing a pair of guns—forcing yourself in where you aren't wanted!"

Bill, for once in his life, was stricken dumb. The scornful glance of the surprising girl swept him up and down; she turned a straight, slim, haughty back on him, and walked away.

Never in all his reckless happy-go-lucky life had the big cowboy been so discomfited. Always used to doing, saying and taking what he chose, as Pop Welch put it, "Bill Stanton could get away with murder an' leave the corpse laughin'." Now, however, a slim girl had turned the tables on him.

Suddenly he became aware of smiling faces everywhere, and then four determined-looking men bore down upon him. His instinctive resistance was smothered by superior force; he found himself moving toward the door, down a sort of lane of laughter.

"Hey!" he protested. "What's the big idea, you eggs? I—"

"Idea is that guns ain't allowed at these here parties no more, Bill," explained Ed Peters soothingly. "Yuh wouldn't listen before, so we're takin' yuh outside."

"Huh!" grunted Bill. "Gettin' almighty fussy recent, ain't yuh? Shucks, I didn't mean no harm."

"But yuh're goin' out," muttered one of the other men, who turned out to be the same Lizard Porter from whose arms Bill had plucked May Converse.

Bill met the scowling glance of the disgruntled Lizard, grinned widely, and ceased to resist.

"I'll go peaceably, gents. Reckon I made a mistake, but I'm doggoned if it wasn't worth it!"

They accompanied him to the door, where he turned and laughed softly into Lizard's angry face. Porter, freshly annoyed, thrust his nose close to Bill's.

"It mighta been worth it, an' it might not, Stanton," he grated. "My money goes against yuh, same as always. Things was plumb peaceful hereabouts durin' yuhr absence, cowboy. For one, I ain't goin' to stand by an' let yuh raise hell now that yuh've come back. Sabe?"

Bill stopped laughing. "I ain't certain I do, Lizard. Explain yuhrself!"

Ed Peters shoved the two apart. "Here now, don't start no rough stuff!" he said. "Yuh better beat it, Bill. Cool down, Lizard!"

Bill nodded, a thin smile on his handsome face. "Right, Ed. But before I drag it I aim to know just what Lizard has on what he calls his mind. Speak yuhr piece, hombre!"

Porter did not hesitate. He was as big a man as Bill, and some counted him as good-looking, but for some reason he and Bill had never hit it off. From boyhood they had been rivals in everything. Admiring the same girl, it was invariably Bill whose quick wit

won the lady's fancy. In poker, it was Bill's cool nerve that bluffed through and won the big pot, though it might be with deuces against the other man's full house. In rodeo meets, Bill Stanton's reckless dash won the plaudits of the crowd and top money. A man who is ever thrust into second place is quite apt to feel resentment. Lizard spoke his now, plainly.

"Yuh've been away a spell, Stanton, an' things has changed here for the better. Miss Converse is responsible for some of the improvements—an' me an' her is friends. Get it?"

Bill took a deep breath and laughed softly. "Stringin' yuhr wire afore yuh get title to the property, ain't yuh, Lizard?"

For a moment it looked as if a fight was inevitable. Bill waited expectantly for Porter to make the first move, but instead Lizard allowed Ed Peters to thrust in between them, and let the other men drag him back into the schoolhouse.

"My gosh, Bill!" Peters exclaimed. "That mighta been a mess!"

"I came peaceable," retorted Bill sternly. Then his reckless smile flashed out and he clapped Peters on the shoulder. "An' I'll depart similar, ol' hoss. But first, tell me—"

Peters chuckled. "Same ol' hellion, ain't yuh? May Converse is our new schoolma'am, cowboy. Related to Bull Danvers. Comes from down Amarilla way, an' she shore has got the boys stampeded. Likewise she's responsible for the rule against packin' hardware to these here parties."

"Texas gal," mused Bill. "An' plumb overflowin' with notions. Ed, she allowed I was no gentleman. Huh! Mebbe so her education ain't been completed proper."

At this point Slim Collins appeared. The attachment of the bowlegged little puncher for the big reckless Bill Stanton was of long standing, and gave him certain privileges.

"I done my best to warn yuh, fathead," he growled. "But as per usual, yuh couldn't hear nothin' but yuhr own ballyhooin'. How about that poker game—now that yuh been throwed out o' this dump?"

"Poker?" drawled Bill reflectively. "Slim, that's a game of skill an' science—where a man can make use of his natural gifts. Let's go!"

They adjourned to the Bonanza, where they played poker. But for once in his life Bill Stanton found little enjoyment in the pastime; he lost pot after pot through sheer absent-mindedness, to the increasing disgust of Slim. Finally he dropped his cards, thrust the rest of his chips toward the little cowboy, and rose abruptly to his feet.

"I'm through, gents. Sorry, but this game ain't for me to-night. Set still, Slim. I'll be seein' yuh—later."

Paying no heed to protests, he left the saloon. Something extraordinary had happened to him, and he had to be alone to think it out.

It was not so much that his self-esteem had suffered at the hands of the new schoolma'am; it was rather that never until now had it mattered to him what anyone—man or woman—thought of him. Always Bill had done reckless things daringly, without thought or hindrance; always, with gay self-confidence, he had obeyed the impulse of the moment. Whatever pretty face had chanced to catch his eye, had been proper game; and invariably he had been successful in his blithe philandering, perhaps because success or failure had never mattered.

No girl's smile had ever really meant anything to Bill. But now, unexpectedly, he had found one girl who did matter tremendously—only to have her tell him calmly that there was nothing about him that she liked; that he was no gentleman.

"An' she said it like she meant it, too," he mused gloomily. "Doggone it, that hurts! Bill, yuh've got to square yuhrself somehow."

He took a walk. At the outskirts of town he perched on a tree stump and smoked sundry cigarettes ponder-

ing the whys and wherefores of life and love. The resolve grew within him to seek out May Converse and somehow correct that bad first impression he'd made. He would ask her pardon anyhow. Impulsively he set forth to do so.

When he neared the schoolhouse, the strains of *Home, Sweet Home* indicated that the party was about over. Presently he saw her, clinging to the arm of Lizard Porter, smiling and talking as if there never had been an unpleasant moment in her life. The sight of the pair steadied Bill, made him for a brief moment contemplate a postponement of his apology. But after all it was only fair for May's escort to hear what he had to say.

"I beg yuhr pardon, Miss Converse, ma'am."

Bill stood before them, hat in hand, his handsome face flushed with embarrassment. Porter uttered a muffled exclamation and stiffened sharply, but Bill had eyes only for the girl.

May Converse, looking up at him, lost her smile. Gripping Porter's arm a little closer, she started on. But Bill, a stubborn slant to his lean jaw, again blocked the way.

"Miss Converse," he said firmly, "I've come to ask yuhr pardon, ma'am. Ain't it proper—"

"Beat it, Stanton," growled Lizard. "If yuh knowed what was proper yuh'd crawl in yuhr hole—an' stay there!"

The flush left Bill's face, and his lips tightened. But his gray eyes held steadily to the face of the girl, and May, after a moment of hesitation, looked at him squarely.

"If you really mean that, Mister Stanton, I'm glad to forget—"

"But I ain't!" snapped Porter savagely.

Without warning he struck at Bill's face. The cowboy saw the blow coming, but was unable wholly to avoid it. Staggered, a wave of white-hot fury swept over him, and instinctively he lashed back at Lizard.

May screamed, and grabbed at Porter. Lizard, wild-eyed, flung her roughly aside. The two men came together like a pair of longhorn bulls. Blows thudded, bringing grunts and sobbing breaths. They reeled and lurched about, hammering at each other with little display of boxing skill. A ring formed about them; men and women alike were gripped by the spectacle, charmed by their inherent love of conflict.

Even May Converse, after her attempted interference, held back, watching with white face and oddly shining eyes, as the two big cowboys fought furiously. Perhaps in her, too, there lurked an unsuspected primitive woman who thrilled at being fought over.

The scrap ended as suddenly as it began. A wild blow caught Bill on the side of the head, knocked him spinning. Porter sprang to follow up and rushed straight into a punch that started from the ground and ended with a sharp spat at the point of his jaw. He straightened, half turned, went down on his face. Bill, panting, still gripped by that flaming rage which had leaped up in him, swayed on his feet as he glared down at his fallen foe.

"He's out!"

"Knocked cold!"

The crowd surged forward. Porter was lifted up and carried to the watering trough. Men slapped Bill on the back. Girls squealed and exclaimed. But the big cowboy, blood running down his chin from a cut lip, pushed through to confront the girl who had started to follow the men who carried Lizard away, only to turn back as if drawn by some force outside herself. Again they faced each other—the one, more than ever the dominant male; the other, a woman of fire and ice.

"Miss Converse, ma'am," Bill said ruefully, "I've got to ask yuhr pardon again. I—I seem to get in wrong tonight—no matter what I do! But I never meant this to happen. Yuh've got to believe that, Miss Converse!"

"I—I—"

Dark eyes fluttered up to his, widened, fell away. He saw her lips quiver, saw the swift rise and fall of her rounded breast, and a mighty yearning welled up in him. Unconsciously he swayed towards her, but with a muffled cry she turned and fled from him.

"Don't! Please—I don't know what I believe!"

Bill's hands dropped to his sides. He stared after her as she disappeared inside the schoolhouse, a strange rapt look on his bruised face, his gray eyes softly glowing. Like a man awaking from sleep to find his dream a marvelous reality, he turned stiffly at the grip of a hand on his arm.

"Hey, yuh long-eared jackmule! I mighta knowed yuh'd bust yuhrself intuh more trouble soon as I let yuh outa my sight. C'mon, dang yuh, afore they jail yuh or somethin'. Damn if I don't reckon yuh been holdin' out on me, yuh cock-eyed billy goat! Drunk, that's what yuh are, an' me not havin' tasted no likker for a dawg's age. Was it tequila yuh brung back from across the line? Lead me to it!"

Bill, staring down into Slim's screwed up face, and, reading in it concern far deeper than the little puncher's words would indicate, managed to grin.

"Yuh know I never drink, Slim. No, it ain't that—it's— But let's get outa here."

Shaken inwardly, bruised outwardly, Bill was glad to escape from curious eyes. Slim, blinking wisely, muttered a bad word, and led the way to the hotel.

"Hell!" spat the little cowboy when they were alone. "I allus figgered some female 'ud get the Injun sign on yuh some day, yuh big fathead. An' dang me, if it ain't happened! Mebbe yuh don't drink, Bill, but yuh're shore as hell drunk right now. Sleep it off, fer Pete's sake!"

But Bill did not sleep it off. Morning found him filled with a strange new restlessness. He wakened early, although it was Sunday and there was no reason for it whatever. And while Slim still snored, he shaved carefully and dressed with exceeding care. He was tiptoeing out of the room when Slim rolled over, and sat up, staring.

"My Gawd! I figgered yuh might get halfway sane durin' the night, but I see I was plumb an' perzackly wrong! Dolled up like the Queen o' Sheba's newest boy friend, ain't yuh? An' where the hell d'yuh figger to be goin', yuh tin-plated nit-wit?"

Bill grinned sheepishly. "What's it to you, wart? Go on, get yuhr sleep out. Me, I'm huntin' breakfast, that's all."

"Yeah? Like hell. Huntin' trouble, yuh mean! Well, yuh'll likely find it. If yuh get in jail, I'll fetch yuh animal crackers an' paper dolls, dang yuh!"

With which sarcasm, Slim ducked under the bedclothes, while Bill, his face somewhat red, went out and banged the door.

His breakfast was eaten alone, and was served by a grouchy waitress who plainly considered herself grievously imposed upon by having such an early customer. Out in the clear crisp air, Bill found few signs of life, so that again it was impressed upon him that this was Sunday. Presently the townspeople would be stirring, he supposed, and if there was a preacher to conduct services in the little church which he had helped to build, that would occupy all the decent folk. May Converse would go to church—with Lizard Porter, of course.

Bill found himself in need of space, yearning for the feel of a horse between his legs. A man could think best so. At the livery he got his horse, saddled and mounted. When he rode out of town, he headed south through the rolling foothills, rather than north or west into the higher mountains.

The motion of the horse, the rolling panorama of the hills, the pungent odor of the pine-scented air, was a sedative to his jangled nerves. His mind

quickened; he considered his problem more carefully. It was, he realized, the biggest one that had ever confronted him.

Life until now, save for the tragedy of his father's death, had been easy enough and kind enough. Without responsibilities of any kind, he had been free to drift where he pleased, to work when it suited him, to play when he chose. Now he must get a real job, stick to it, settle down. But, first and foremost, he must set himself straight with this girl who had changed all things for him so radically. He must make sure, for one thing, that she was not promised to another.

"But if it's Lizard, it won't count," he told himself. "He ain't good enough to look at her."

That came out, too, now that he could think clearly. Always there had been something about Porter which, for him, had not rung true. Lizard was big, strong, good-looking; almost Bill's equal with rope, six-gun or wild horse. But instinct had told Bill long ago that there was a yellow streak in him; something that kept other men from trusting him wholly, from liking him too well. Perhaps it was this same thing that had kept several girls from marrying him.

It was odd, the feeling that came to him suddenly. It seemed that he must lose no time about heading back to town to warn the girl against being too friendly with Porter. But how could he do that?

"Shucks," he mused ruefully. "She's got no big opinion of me. Reckon she'd about tell me where to head, if I busted in with news like that. No, I got to prove up—as a friend first. Only I hope I ain't too late gettin' started!

"Hell, I got no chance," he told himself moodily. "She's a thoroughbred. She'll want a man who's done somethin' besides drift with the wind, like a tumbleweed. Me, I'm just no account. Why, I reckon Lizard is a better man than me, at that! He's stuck to his job at the Bar 6. If he ain't foreman now, he'll get there. I had the same chance, but— Oh, hell, I've been a fool!"

Yes, he'd had the same chance, or a better one. Tom Clark, who owned the Bar 6, had liked him. Tom had even gone out of his way to make certain tentative promises, but Bill had only laughed and confessed to a yearning to see the world.

"Lizard will stick," he remembered saying. "He's a good cowhand, Tom. Give him the breaks. Me, I got an itchin' hoof."

So Bill and Slim had drifted, and Lizard had stayed on. Lizard still stayed. That gave him a position in the country. He knew his business, and unless something happened to bring out that yellow streak, or whatever it was, he'd live and die a successful man; while Bill Stanton never had amounted to anything.

"But I'm changin' that!" he vowed almost angrily. "I'll root down an' stay with a job now, if there's still a chance—"

The chance was May Converse. If Porter had won her love, then what price success? Nothing had ever mattered until she came along. Nothing would ever matter again should she be lost to him. He reined in his horse at the brow of a hill, stared moodily down the winding trail. Then, with a lift of his wide shoulders and a tightening of his mouth, he turned back towards Twin Peaks. The sooner he found out exactly where he stood, the better.

He had ridden farther than he realized. Impatience drove him, but the way was uphill and it was not in him to punish a horse unnecessarily. It was past noon when the outskirts of the little mining town came into view.

Twin Peaks looked oddly deserted. There was no one at the livery corral as he rode past; no one loitered along the street; the hotel porch was tenanted by empty chairs. One saddled horse stood at the hitch-post. Uneasiness grew upon Bill Stanton. He swung down and strode across the walk, into

the gloomy lobby. A small, skinny, bowlegged man lunged into him, clawing at him with both hands.

"Bill! Wherever have yuh been! Yuh blasted billy goat, there's hell a-poppin' hereabouts. An' they lay it onto you. At least some of 'em do. I been lookin' all over hell for yuh. Can't yuh talk, yuh dumb egg?"

Bill shoved the yammering Slim away, held him by the shoulders.

"Gimme a chance," he growled. "I went for a ride south o' town. What's wrong, Slim?"

Slim gulped, burst into coherent speech. Bill listened with a feeling of ice creeping about his heart, stilling its beat, choking him. His fingers dug into his companion's wiry shoulders; his voice sounded thick.

"Kidnaped! An' they claim it was me! Slim, for Gawd's sake—"

"She went ridin' after breakfast, with Jerry Danvers. He's her cousin, or somethin'. They rid up the mountain trail, five or six miles. 'Bout an hour ago Jerry came back, hangin' to his hoss, bad hurt. Says they was ridin' where the trail is narrow when all of a sudden somethin' yanked him outa the saddle.

"As he fell he got one squint at a man; then he musta been busted over the dome with a hawg-leg. When he woke up the gal was gone. The hull town an' country is a-huntin'. Jerry says the man he seen was yuhr size, an' some egg recommembered hearin' yuh talk last night at the schoolhouse about kidnapin' the gal. So—"

"The mountain trail!" Bill muttered, giving the little cowboy a savage shake. "What yuh waitin' for? Come on! If he's hurt her—"

He turned, leaped for the door. Slim raced after him, bowed legs moving like pistons.

"Who?" panted the little puncher. "Yuh don't mean—"

"Lizard! Of course! Who else? Where's yuhr bronc, wart? We're ridin'. An' when I catch that lousy roadrunner—"

"Save it!" snapped Slim, clawing at his saddle horn. "Yuh allus did talk too much, yuh long-legged female fancier! Talked yuhrself—an' the gal—into a proper hole this time. Why—"

But Bill, vaulting into the saddle, was off, spurring like a madman up the mountain trail. Slim thundered after him. The little puncher's button mouth was twisted in a queer tight grin.

The steepness of the trail slowed them. Presently Bill breathed his horse, and Slim came abreast. They looked at each other grimly now. This was likely to be a long trail. The kidnaper had more than an hour's start; the country was rough, filled with admirable hiding places, of such character that it would take keen eyes to pick up the sign. Few men thereabouts knew the mountain country as well as Bill Stanton, who had grown up there; but one who did was Joe Porter, the Lizard, who had become a kidnaper.

"We'll find them," said Slim, almost gently.

"Got to!" muttered Bill, and started his horse again.

A party of searchers suddenly swarmed down upon them.

"Slim's caught him!"

"String him up, the dirty kidnaper!"

"Where is she, Stanton? Slim, where—"

"Can it, yuh buzzards!" snapped Slim, swinging his horse ahead of Bill's. "I told yuh Bill had nothin' to do with no kidnapin'. He rid south of town afore breakfast. Come in just now."

The crowd hesitated, plainly suspicious. Bill Stanton saw suddenly that a drifter, no matter how well liked he may be, can count his supporters on mighty few fingers in a showdown. His gray eyes swept the sullen faces grimly.

"You men don't need to believe Slim—or me," he said harshly. "But the skunk that run off with Miss Converse

headed this way, an' we're goin' through. Don't try to stop us!"

They did not. Bill spurred his horse on up the trail. Slim followed close. Behind the little puncher some of the others fell in. That did not matter. One thing alone concerned Bill Stanton. He had to find May Converse.

Understanding came to him as he rode. He realized that the old rivalry between himself and Lizard Porter, extending over the years since boyhood, was responsible for this present situation. Nothing had been settled between them up to now. Even the fight last night had settled nothing. That, and the rest, merely indicated the hatred which had grown between them, unsuspected by himself.

"If he's hurt her, I'll kill him!" he muttered.

Slim, riding abreast, looked at him queerly.

"Seems like yuh got somethin' against that egg," surmised the bow-legged cowboy shrewdly. "'Pears like he's the one to hold a grudge, Bill. Mostly yuh've made it hard for him to show as a top-hand, when yuh've been around."

Bill grunted. Slim could hardly understand how all that had gone before had been as nothing, yet had laid the foundation for the present. He could not fully grasp it himself. Instinct, intuition, emotion, all were mixed up with logic and reason.

"The top color has rubbed off an' the yellow is showin' through at last," he said. "Yellow is coyote color, Slim. Lizard has made believe he is a wolf, but a coyote steals instead of fightin' fair, and that's what he really is."

It was Slim's turn to grunt. They drove their tiring horses along the narrow trail.

Other searchers appeared with increasing frequency. All eyed Bill with surprise, many with hostility and suspicion, but none attempted to delay him and none had sighted the kidnaper. Bill, with Slim tagging, drove on and on. They came to the place where May and Jerry Danvers had been stopped. Beyond that they found the last of the searching parties, turning back, having lost all trace of the pair.

"A thousand dollars to the man who finds 'em!" bellowed Bull Danvers.

The big mine owner shoved his horse close to Bill's, glared into the cowboy's narrowed eyes.

"They claim you're responsible for this, Stanton. If my niece has been hurt—"

"Talk won't help her!" rasped Bill.

He spurred his horse past the other man's, rode on up the trail, tailed by Slim. Again a few followed, but presently Bill turned and snarled at them to keep back.

"Can't follow sign with the hull country messin' round!"

It was slow work. A sort of fury possessed Bill Stanton. His squinting eyes missed nothing; he circled this way and that like a bloodhound striving to pick up a lost scent. Gradually he worked away from the trail, bearing northwest over barren boulder-strewn slopes. A chipped rock; a bruised shrub; a small boulder slightly displaced—these signs led him. No Indian could have excelled him that day in trailing. Where physical evidence failed he seemed to move by instinct, until, invariably, he found definite proof that he was right.

An hour passed. Bill, who had been climbing along on foot, trailing his horse by the reins, suddenly stopped, stood erect with his head thrown back, staring towards a sheer blank wall that reared skyward, a quarter of a mile north. Slim, panting and cursing under his breath, heaved alongside. The rest of the searchers were far back, many of them discouraged against following a man who plainly was locoed.

"What yuh gapin' at, yuh dumb egg?" wheezed Slim.

Bill eyed him grimly. "Slim, I've got 'em spotted. Should have doped it out before, when I see the way he was headin'."

Slim groaned. "Cock-eyed again! Why, yuh danged goat, there ain't only solid rock the way yuh're lookin'!"

Bill shook his head. "Yuh're wrong. When I was a kid I prowled all over this country. So did Lizard. That's how come we called him that. Account of the way he could wiggle along bare slippery rock. Yonder, where it looks like a solid wall, there's an old game trail up through a crevice. A led horse could make it. A man on foot, easy. Likewise—"

His lips tightened. Muscles bunched along his lean jaw. His eyes blazed into Slim's until the little puncher blinked and muttered.

"What's eatin' yuh, yuh fathead? I ain't arguin' none, am I? Go ahead—find yuhr ol' crevice, or what have yuh, if yuh figger that's where that coyote has holed up."

"Holed up is right," Bill said bitterly. "We leave the broncs here, Slim. But I reckon yuh better drop back an' head some of the others this way. It might take an army to get that rat outa his hole."

Slim was disposed to argue, but Bill snapped at him so savagely that he obeyed. The big cowboy climbed on up the slope alone.

Care was called for now, as well as haste. If Porter suspected pursuit, he would be on the lookout. The crevice which Bill remembered from boyhood was barely wide enough to permit a horse to pass between its walls; it pitched upward steeply, with a small cave-like widening on a ledge a hundred feet above the base of the rock bluff. From that point on it mounted even more steeply to the top of the bluff. Although he had never explored much further, Bill suspected that a way could be found out over the mountains. But for Porter's purposes, a way out might never be required. A one-armed man could hold off an army there.

"But only a crazy man would pull a stunt like this," Bill thought.

Crash-bang! A gunshot echoed amongst the mountain peaks. Bill Stanton ducked, swung in close to the foot of the bluff, his cheek smarting from the bite of a stone chip flipped almost into his eyes by the bullet. Overhead a harsh voice cursed furiously.

"Hell! You've got the luck of the devil, Stanton. But it won't get yuh nothin' this time. For once I'm takin' top money, an' all hell can't stop me!"

Bill hugged the rock wall, called back urgently. "Don't be a fool, Lizard! Yuh can't get away with this. The hull county is on yuhr trail! Bring Miss Converse down an' we'll make out it was just a joke."

Porter snarled. "It's no joke! The gal is mine. I ain't goin' to stand back an' see yuh take her away from me, like yuh've took everythin' else, by Gawd!"

Again the crash of a gunshot echoed off through the mountains. Bill Stanton, hugging the rock wall, moved forward cautiously, trying to get a look up to where Porter lay. A sort of despair set its teeth in him. He had located the kidnaper, true enough, but to rescue the girl was another matter.

With May there on the ledge, apparently gagged and bound, Lizard Porter was comparatively safe. He could not be shot at without endangering the girl too, whereas to attempt to reach him would be to court death. If by dying he could have saved the girl he loved, Bill would not have hesitated to pay the full cost, but he knew that there was not the slightest chance of climbing that crevice in the face of Porter's gun.

Half an hour passed. Bill worked about cautiously, trying to discover some way to reach the elevated cave, but whenever he showed as much as an eyebrow, Porter's gun roared and lead snarled down at him. If the man had ammunition enough, he could remain where he was until starvation got him. Another possibility was that in the dark of the night he could escape

on up the crevice, taking the girl with him. Unless, in the meantime, he killed her.

Slim returned, bringing a dozen men with him. Bill explained the situation, and Bull Danvers tried his hand at arguing with Porter. His luck was no better than Bill's had been. Lizard snarled defiance, said the girl was his and he meant to have her or make sure that no one else did. No argument, threat or promise moved him.

"We've got to get him out of there," Bill growled grimly.

"How?" inquired Slim, equally grim. "Yuh growed some wings recent?"

Bill did not answer. He stood staring fixedly at the sheer wall of rock which reared above them, and gradually a queer glance came into his narrowed eyes. Abruptly, with a click of his teeth, he faced about.

"There's one chance to get that locoed coyote," he stated jerkily. "See that tree hangin' over the rim of the bluff? With a long enough rope a man could swing himself down and hop onto Lizard's back."

"But how get to that tree?" wondered Slim doubtfully.

"I'll try it. Get some ropes."

"If he spots yuh, it'll be good night!"

"I'll chance it. Yuh fellas keep him from lookin' up."

Draping saddle ropes about his shoulders, he made sure of his guns, chose as his starting place a weathered corner of the bluff, and began to climb.

The wall was almost vertical—almost, but not quite. That and the fact that it was seamed and cracked, gave him his chance. With his boots off, clinging with fingers and toes that became bruised and torn before he had barely started, he worked slowly up. There was no chance to rest, no opportunity to relieve the tension on his straining muscles. Twice he slipped, while the men below held their breaths. Once everything turned black, and he thought the end had come. But he managed to hang on until the blackness passed. Then he went on climbing.

The pleading face of May Converse seemed to look down at him. Her voice was in his ears. Her hair was pale gold—her eyes— He climbed on and on, reaching for her, while his fingers and toes grew numb and the ache that enveloped his tortured body was beyond description. Yet he bore the pain, kept on crawling up and up, long after there ceased to be any apparent connection between himself and his body. He was still crawling, long after the pain and the face of the girl encompassed his whole world, two opposing forces that fought each other.

All at once he was lying face down across the rim of the bluff. For long moments he lay there, sobbing breaths of agony, while his blood poured through him like a blazing torrent. His mind was a blank. He might have been a dead man. Then down below sounded a crash of shots, a burst of yells. It cut through his coma, brought him staggering upright.

But his task was still far from done. He had now to trust his life to knotted lariats, fastened about a tree trunk that looked none too substantial, lowered over rimrock that would rub and fray it. But Bill did not think of that. He tied the ropes together, twisted one end about the tree trunk, close to the root. Then he lowered a loop over the edge of the bluff, holding the coil in his hand. Next, before launching himself into space on that slender support, he ripped off his flannel shirt, made a pad of it, and laid it under the rope. Finally, with a twist around his leg, he slipped over the edge.

Below him the uproar continued. Slim and the others were doing their part. Lizard Porter's gun roared frequently. Bill dropped down, down, while the slender rope strained and stretched under his weight. He dared not look up, and when he glanced down to judge how much farther he must go, the gaping empty space sickened him. Down, down, foot by foot, he went.

At last he paused. The battle below

waged furiously. A look told him that he was too far to the right to drop onto the ledge where Porter crouched. He saw the man raise his gun, shoot, duck back. Of May there was no sight, but he judged that she would be farther back, under the overhang.

What Bill had to do now was more difficult than anything he had yet undertaken. He had to swing over, gage his distance accurately, and drop himself down upon that narrow lip of ledge, without letting Porter discover him until he landed. Holding to the rope with one hand and the twist around his leg, he pushed himself out from the wall carefully. And right then Lizard Porter looked up!

The expression on the man's face was almost ludicrous. His eyes popped, his jaw dropped. For a moment he seemed gripped by paralysis. And in that brief split second of time, Bill Stanton exploded into desperate action. A shove and a kick against the wall sent him swinging over towards the ledge. Porter's gun lifted, roared. A flame scorched Bill's chest. He let go, hurtled down through space, the breath snapping from his lips.

Crash—crash—crash! Three times, quick as light, Porter's gun roared and spat lead and flames. Bill felt nothing, knew nothing, until a jar almost stunned him, drove his feet up towards his chin. He went down onto his hands and knees, heard a snarling oath, saw a blurred shape swing towards him.

Somehow he managed to fling himself forward in a sort of toad-like hop. His shoulder crashed into something solid. Over his head a gun roared. Then he and Porter were clawing and wrestling all over that narrow ledge.

Porter rolled on top. His left hand jammed onto Bill's throat. His right hand, gripping his gun, swished down viciously. Bill grabbed desperately, caught the descending wrist, broke the force of the blow. His clenched left hand drove into Porter's belly. A surge and a twist of overstrained muscles sent them rolling again, over and over.

Again it was Lizard Porter, fresher and stronger, who came uppermost. Again his hand fastened into Bill's throat, choking him. The gun was lost now somewhere, but that grip on Bill's throat was winning out. Desperately he strained and tossed and hammered.

But Porter, snarling, held on and squeezed and squeezed. Black spots danced before Bill's eyes. His lungs seemed about to burst. With a final effort he swung his long legs up, tried to clamp his ankles about Porter's neck. He failed, but the effort broke, for an instant, Lizard's grip of his throat, and in that instant Bill rolled over, came to his knees.

Porter, cursing wildly, flung about, launched towards him. Bill swung his right and left fists blindly. Something swept past him. There was a sobbing cry, a thud. A heavy body fell against him, slid down, limp hands clawing at his bare chest. Bill toppled slowly forward.

The men below swarmed up the crevice trail. They found one man wholly unconscious, another practically so, and an almost hysterical girl, still gagged, who had managed somehow to wriggle one hand loose from the rope that had bound her. In that hand she still clenched the gun which she had hammered down upon Lizard's head.

Bill Stanton, aroused by a dash of water in his face, sat up, supported by Slim. Looking about eagerly, he saw May in Bull Danvers' arms, and a queer sort of smile parted his bruised lips.

"Seems like the party is over," he murmured. "Slim, I never was cut out for no mountain sheep!"

May Converse twisted about, looked at him. Danvers tried to draw her back, to support her with his arm, but she pushed him away. Bill, staring at her like a man in a trance, got slowly to his feet. She stood before him, close but not touching him, and in the dark depths of her eyes was a light that made him tremble.

"I knew you'd come," she said. "That is what kept me alive, I think. You

see, I knew he'd never let me go—unless you did come."

Bill stared at her.

"Of course I came. May, I'll come—always—anywhere—"

Bull Danvers shoved forward. "Stanton, you made good, showed that there's real stuff in you as well as a heap of foolishness. I'm glad you get the reward."

Then May Converse turned sharply. Something seemed to shatter her face to bits for an instant. It was like a beautiful painting torn in shreds.

"Reward? What do you mean?" Her voice was flat.

Bill Stanton gently pushed her away so that he alone confronted Danvers.

"Wait! Danvers, do yuh think I'd touch one cent of yuhr money? Why, yuh fool, I've got my reward!"

And then, with a flash of his untamed spirit, his old recklessness, he swept the startled girl into his arms, laughed down into her confused face, her half-fearful eyes.

"May, I told yuh that yuh'd like me! Now I'm tellin' yuh that yuh're goin' to love me!"

His lips covered hers that stirred beneath them. As his arms tightened about her, lifting her against his heart, so did her arms creep up about his neck, and cling there.

After a long moment, May's golden head fell back against his shoulder, her dark eyes, shining with a light such as never was before, smiled into his.

"But you're wrong, Bill! I'm not going to do what you say! You see—Oh, Bill, I loved you the moment I saw you! That's what caused all this. Last night I told Joe I could never marry him, now that you had come."

Bull Danvers, with a grunt of unbelief, started to say something, but Slim Collins spoke softly in the old man's ear.

"Lay off, yuh bloated mine owner! Yuh ain't got gold enough in all yuhr mines to give them two anythin'!"

LONGHORN LORE

GREAT as he was in his day, the longhorn has just about passed from the rangeland picture, giving way chiefly to stockier Herefords (whitefaces), Durhams, shorthorns and Polled Anguses. The coming of the railroads marked the decline of the longhorn. As long as cattle had to walk their own way to market, he was king. For never has cow animal lived that could stand the grilling travel of the thousand-mile trails like he could.

While an ordinary day's trail drive on the old cattle trails was only fifteen to twenty miles a day, the longhorn could, if pushed to it, cross a waterless strip of forty to fifty miles in a twenty-four-hour drive.

After the Civil War there were probably five to six million cattle on the wild Texas ranges. And there was a good market for beef in the north and east. If these cattle had been the modern heavy beef animals built for broad cuts of T-bone steaks, they would have stayed on the range, and the great epochal cattle industry of the trail driving days would never have been.

But they were longhorns—tough, lean-shanked, long-legged travelers. So the cattle barons inaugurated the most remarkable practice of livestock history, driving cattle "up the trail"—from Texas to the railroad in Kansas, from Texas and New Mexico to the northern ranges and Indian reservations of Wyoming, Montana and Nebraska, from the same ranges to the California gold fields. And there was at least one drive all the way from the Texas border to New York State. The modern heavy beef steers could never have done it, any more than you could get a decent load of longhorned rannies in a modern cattle freight car.

The longhorn's original home was not the plains country, but the brushy sections of south Texas. Here he lived like a wild animal, often lying hidden by day and grazing only at night. Sometimes he managed to keep his freedom until his great horns were ridgy and rough with the wrinkles of age—hence his nickname, "mossy-horn."

The longhorn was a rustler. He could live and fatten on range where a Jersey cow would die of starvation in a week. He could go for a long time without water, and often ranged as far as twenty or thirty miles from the nearest water hole.

For self-reliance the cattle world has never known his equal. But you couldn't cut the meat from his carcass that you can from a Hereford, and as cattle are raised primarily for meat, the longhorn had to go—but not quite.

Lest this very picturesque monarch of the old, hard days of the range pass entirely from the picture, a herd has been gathered to be kept on the Wichita National Forest for future generations to look at—and marvel.

The Saddle Sleuth

By Paul Everman

Sleuthing on the range is a game that two can play, as one cocksure hombre found out when he was busily engaged in this strange pastime. For there was a keen-eyed old ranch woman who, with true Western pluck, set out on the braggart's trail to show him up in his true colors, thereby hoping to reunite two estranged young lovers, whom his machinations were holding apart.

FROM the deep, shaded porch of her adobe ranch house, Widow Bradley, the Cattle Queen of Rio Blanco, looked down toward the river forks and watched Carrie Mason ride past under the gallant escort of the newcomer who called himself the "Saddle Sleuth."

"Jeffries," Widow Bradley musingly addressed her foreman, who had come swinging over from the stockaded corrals, "don't the thought strike you that our young friend and neighbor, Tom McCorkle, is in danger of losing out entirely with Carrie Mason, all on account of the whirlwind courting of this marvelous Saddle Sleuth man?"

"P'raps," responded Jeffries, a stocky man of middle age.

Jeffries wasn't romantic-minded. And, in his private opinion, Widow Bradley had one failing—a lively, unquenchable curiosity in the love affairs of other folks.

"Jeffries, did you see that?" said Widow Bradley sharply, pointing down the slope.

She was a rotund little woman with shrewd gray eyes that roved alertly and missed nothing. For years Widow Bradley had looked the same, dressed the same; seeming to grow no older. Her three growing daughters, now boarding in town during the school months, despaired at her divided buckskin skirts, her chambray shirts, her calfskin boots and her faded, floppy gray sombrero.

The girls were beginning to show anxiety about her complexion too,

for harsh winds and flaming sun had given it a fixed ruddiness which, while honest and cheerful, was hardly in fashion. But Widow Bradley, unruffled and unchanged, continued to live as she had always lived—a busy life in the saddle interspersed with moments of relaxation at her comfortable Flying 9 ranch house.

A hundred yards below the ranch house, the two forks of Rio Blanco wound through fringes of bushy-topped walnut trees and united with a churning and tossing of jeweled white spray. Clattering across the little wooden bridge down there, Carrie Mason, daughter of Matt Mason, who owned the Bar 6 Ranch, had waved at Widow Bradley.

Carrie was a pretty young woman, with brown eyes brimful of warmth and sparkle. At her side rode a tall, dark, lean-faced man—a newcomer whose name was Pickett, though he was generally known by the fancy title the "Saddle Sleuth." Pickett was mounted on a trim, spirited Morgan saddle horse.

All at once, a piece of paper blowing out from the underbrush had caused Carrie Mason's mount, a long-barreled red roan, to shy sharply off the trail. Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth, reined swiftly to the girl's side. His arm went about her waist. Their heads were close together for a moment, and then, the roan horse having quieted, they cantered on down the trail.

"You saw that, Jeffries?" Widow Bradley asked, frowning. "Just a piece of nonsensical show-off on the Saddle Sleuth's part! Carrie wasn't in a mite of danger.

"But maybe you noticed—she didn't seem special quick on the trigger in detaching herself from that man's embrace. And her—the same girl that our young friend and neighbor, Tom McCorkle, has been courting steady for three years! What do you reckon Tom would have thought if he'd seen Pickett rope his arm around Carrie thataway?"

"I dunno," admitted Jeffries. "Tom's hot-headed. He might 'a' grabbed that Saddle Sleuth hombre and ducked him in the river, same as he done ol' Buzz Runyon coupla weeks back."

Widow Bradley laughed, saying vigorously, "Old Buzz had that ducking coming to him. He's the most quarrelsome man in these parts; always picking fusses with his neighbors. But this present matter that we're discussing, Jeffries, is a heap more important than a little quarrel over a boundary, such as Tom and old Buzz engaged in. Tell me! What do you know about this Saddle Sleuth man, anyhow?"

"Not much, Miz Bradley. Like you know, he showed up in these parts coupla weeks ago, an' started boardin' over at Matt Mason's Bar 6 Ranch. He told Matt that he's been a range detective, a deputy sheriff an' a Texas Ranger at various times durin' his career. On account of his extryordinary skill in runnin' down desprit criminals, he has quite a reputation.

"Matt Mason tells me that this gent's got a plumb uncanny gift of deductin' things from hoss tracks. It's rumored that he's engaged in secret detective work at present, tryin' to clear up some rustlin' that's s'posed to have occurred in these parts."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Widow Bradley sniffed. "This Saddle Sleuth, as he calls himself, just happened to be riding through, and Carrie Mason took his eye. That's the only reason he's staying on and boarding at the Bar 6—I'll bet on it! I met him out on the range, coupla days ago. Talked to him some. I put him down right away as a four-flushe

"I don't like his wall-eyed look," she went on. "I'm almost tempted to meddle a bit and try to make this three-cornered romance turn out right. But I ain't a meddlesome woman by nature. Don't ever meddle in young folks' love affairs, Jeffries!"

"Me meddle?" gasped Jeffries. "Gosh no!" And he made his escape.

Despite her impressive lecture on the evils of meddling, Widow Bradley had very definitely decided to meddle in the love affair that concerned Carrie Mason, Tom McCorkle and the Saddle Sleuth. She realized that she must use skill and tact and guile; otherwise, the parties concerned would shy away. She would find herself an object of scorn—an exposed meddler, in other words—and the desired results would not be attained.

Three hours later, with a few personal belongings tied in a slicker behind her saddle, she mounted a favorite saddle horse, telling Teresita, her wrinkled Mexican housekeeper, that she was riding over to Matt Mason's Bar 6 Ranch for a spell of visiting.

The route chosen by Widow Bradley was a roundabout one, calculated to take her past Tom McCorkle's Rafter N Ranch. She followed a little-used wagon road over the first hogback to the south; ascended grades that led to higher elevations where piñons grew thickly and even a few pines towered against the sky. And finally, still a couple of miles from the Rafter N, she came unexpectedly upon Tom McCorkle.

Tom, an energetic young cowman with blue eyes so piercing that they seemed capable of reading a brand through a saddle blanket, was sitting on his horse atop a pinnacle. He was gazing intently down at the main highway, which wound about through the Turkeytrack Hills only a quarter of a mile away.

Down there, one hand on the horn of his saddle and the other on the cantle, Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth, was leaning forward, talking to a stubble-bearded man in a blue woollen shirt. The stubble-bearded man seemed to be a prospector; for two burros, loaded with packs and mining tools, stood near him.

"Widow Bradley!" Tom McCorkle had whirled as Widow Bradley rode up behind him.

"I was just on my way over to your place, Tom," she explained. "I've been wanting to take a look at that new ranch house you built just recent. If you ain't busy—"

"We'll ride right on over," Tom proposed heartily.

As they left the pinnacle, Widow Bradley noticed the final sharp glance he directed toward the Saddle Sleuth. The latter, unaware of the two riders above him, was still talking to the prospector.

Tom McCorkle's new ranch house stood on a cedar-grown hillslope. The outer walls were covered with long, golden-brown slabs of pine bark. The three rooms, while small, were cosy and inviting. They had a somewhat rustic appearance.

Except for a space three feet wide and a couple of feet high behind the sheet-iron heating stove, the inner walls had not been sheathed. Because of this, the studding and rafters showed, dividing walls and ceiling into rectangular sections.

Widow Bradley thought the kitchen especially pleasing.

"A cool kitchen!" she said enthusiastically. "While she stands here, busy at her work, Carrie can look out and enjoy a wonderful view of these Turkeytrack Hills, with the mountains showing up blue in the background!"

Tom winced. Slowly he said, "I had dreamed of that very thing, Widow Bradley, but— Well, all dreams don't always come true, do they?"

"Lawsy me!" cried Widow Bradley in a dismayed tone. "Now what have I gone and said! Just a-taking too much for granted, I reckon. Folks have been saying that you and Carrie is engaged, and that one reason you built this new house is because you and her planned to get married real soon.

"Please don't think, just account of that unfortunate remark I made, that I'm a-meddling in your affairs, Tom," she said virtuously. "Don't tell me any more. I don't want you to think I'm a-meddling."

"I reckon *I'm* the one who has taken

too much for granted, Widow Bradley," said Tom quietly. "You see, Carrie has never promised to marry me. But I'm a stubborn kind of a cuss," he ended, summoning a smile to temper the sudden flash of his blue eyes; "and I reckon I'll keep on a-riding the trail to the Mason ranch till Carrie tells me to stop."

Widow Bradley presently jogged on toward the Mason Bar 6 Ranch.

"If Carrie was a rattle-brained girl, I wouldn't waste my time in this affair," she reflected. "But Carrie's sensible, most ways. I never took her pretty little head to be like a tumbleweed, turned by every gust of wind."

Matt Mason's Bar 6 ranch house, a low, flat-roofed building of gray stone, sat snugly in a corner where two rows of tall poplar trees met to form a right angle. When Widow Bradley rode up, shortly after noon, announcing that she had come to visit for a few days, she received a warm welcome.

Matt Mason, a big clumsy man with a booming voice, pumped her hand till her arm ached. And Carrie, eyes a-sparkle, flew about busily, eager to dispense hospitality in its most radiant form. She was a close friend of Widow Bradley's three daughters, who were now in town attending school.

Widow Bradley and the Masons chatted on the porch for some time. Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth, was mentioned. Matt Mason explained that the man was staying with them temporary-like, working on some secret detective work—he didn't know its exact nature.

It seemed that the Saddle Sleuth had been providing considerable entertainment for the Bar 6 folks through his ability to read horse tracks.

"There comes Pickett a-ridin' in now," said Mason suddenly, glancing toward the big square corral. "Mebby you'd like to see him do some track-readin', Miz Bradley. I've got some tracks over there on the highway that ought to stump him. They was made by— Well, I saw 'em made, but the Saddle Sleuth didn't, bein's as how he was away from the ranch all morning. Let's see what he makes of 'em."

He led the way to the highway, which passed along the poplars near the side of the ranch house. Then he brought the Saddle Sleuth over from the corral and pointed out some marks in the dust. Before stooping to scrutinize the marks, the man doffed his hat flourishingly for Carrie's benefit.

A couple of Bar 6 cowhands came hastening up to witness the show. And just then, Tom McCorkle rode into view over a hill, and joined the group. He smiled at Carrie, whose head bobbed a nervous little nod of greeting. Matt Mason explained to Tom the nature of the performance about to take place.

Finally, Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth, straightened erect. "About these here tracks, I will now state the followin' facts," he announced. "Sometime this morning, a prospector traveled this road with two pack burros. He camped right yonder," he explained, pointing to a spot fifty feet up the road, "and et a bite of lunch."

Matt Mason stared in wonderment. "That's exactly what happened," he admitted. "But how in Sam Hill could you figger that out, jest from them tracks?"

The answer came promptly. "Two sets of burro tracks show plain, and I know there was packs on the burros, for the marks of the packs are visible in the dust yonder where the burros laid down to rest.

"There's another noticeable mark there too, where the ground was scraped by some sharp instrument—prob'ly a pick that was tied to one of the pack saddles. Which informs me that the burro driver—yuh'll notice his footprints here—was likely a prospector. And I know he et lunch here, because over yonder I see a piece of Mexican curd cheese that he nibbled on and throwed away."

The Saddle Sleuth glanced triumphantly at Carrie Mason, whose eyes

were sparkling, dancing. Mason and his punchers were offering appropriate comments of admiration. Widow Bradley and Tom McCorkle exchanged glances.

"See here, Pickett," said Tom, rather sharply, "am I to understand that you never even seen this prospector and the two burros you're tellin' us about?"

"Of course I didn't see 'em," the Saddle Sleuth half snarled. "These tracks tell a plain story."

Tom eyed him in contempt, but said nothing more.

During the remainder of the afternoon, which Widow Bradley enjoyed immensely, Carrie Mason undertook the difficult job of entertaining two suitors whose animosity toward each other was increasingly evident. They all sat on the ranch house porch. The Saddle Sleuth did most of the talking, and he talked rather fluently.

Still, there were awkward lapses in conversation. Tom McCorkle and the Saddle Sleuth said not a word to each other. Flushed and ill at ease, Carrie struggled to relieve the noticeable tenseness of the situation. And Matt Mason didn't help matters any. With clumsy joviality he made pointed remarks calculated to twit the two younger men about their rivalry for his daughter's hand.

At last, Carrie fled into the house, saying she must start getting supper.

"And you'll stay and have supper with us, won't you, Tom?" she inquired nervously, from the doorway.

Tom said he sure appreciated the invitation, but he must be riding now. He went over to his horse, which was tied to a hitch-rail yon side the line of poplars. The Saddle Sleuth followed him. And Widow Bradley, with astonishing stealth and swiftness, followed too, hiding behind a tree.

She heard Tom McCorkle speaking in short, clipped tones.

"You lied about not havin' seen that prospector and the two burros, Pickett."

"Be careful! I won't stand for—"

"Of course, after bein' shown the tracks of the two burros, it was easy to couple 'em with the prospector's outfit you'd run across this morning. It really don't matter, exceptin' that you lied and showed yore low grade. You may even be a specialist in readin' tracks, for all I know.

"But now let me tell you something else: I've seen you snoopin' round on my cattle range a couple of times, this last week. I don't know what yore purpose was, but I'm givin' you orders right now to discontinue all such funny business. Savvy?"

Widow Bradley was unable to catch the words that the Saddle Sleuth hissed in reply. But they must have been particularly offensive; for when Tom McCorkle spoke again it was in a low half-choked tone which told that his hot temper was flaming almost beyond control.

"Pickett, yore dirty tongue has made a showdown necessary between you and me. Not here, though. I'm riding on now, over the top of that first north hill. I'll be waiting yon side for you."

A moment later Tom McCorkle struck out alone toward the north.

The Saddle Sleuth's handsome Morgan horse was already saddled; but before mounting to follow Tom, the fellow dashed into the bunkhouse, and came out with a six-shooter strapped on his hip.

Widow Bradley was waiting at the bunkhouse door. "I wouldn't do that, son," she advised quietly. "Better leave that shooting-iron here. Tom McCorkle ain't packing a gun."

Though his peculiar eyes repelled and half terrified her, she continued to meet his glare steadily. At last, muttering furiously to himself, he unstrapped his gunbelt. Then, unarmed, he rode away toward the north hill.

There were no witnesses to this interesting little drama. And no one of the Bar 6 noticed Widow Bradley

as she saddled up her horse in the corral. She jogged away toward the north.

At last she topped the hill, and was surprised to see Tom McCorkle, his shoulders squared aggressively, already riding on, half a mile away. A hundred yards below her, in the same direction, lay the Saddle Sleuth, motionless, his head resting upon the roots of an old juniper tree.

Widow Bradley knelt at the man's side and began wiping his face with a bandanna handkerchief. It was a damaged face; the nose had been bleeding profusely and there was a lump on the right cheekbone. All at once, the Saddle Sleuth's eyes rolled open, and widened with a malevolent glare as he began to remember what had happened.

"You're all right, son," said Widow Bradley soothingly, and continued to wipe his face. "My, Tom McCorkle must have larruped you something scandalous. Lucky for you there wasn't a river close by, else he might have wound up this affair by ducking you in it, same as he did his neighbor, old Buzz Runyon, some time ago.

"But these fist marks will hardly be noticeable when I get through cleaning you up. It's just too bad that things like this have to happen. I won't tell a soul about this," she assured him. "Don't worry, son, I won't tell Carrie."

There was more guile in this assurance than the man realized. Widow Bradley had no intention of telling Carrie, it was true; but only because she doubted that the story of the fight would impress the girl in Tom's favor.

She had known like cases before, when rivals fought over the affections of a girl. And quite often the girl in the case, through pity or some inexplicable impulse, threw herself into the arms of the battered combatant, lashing out scorn and fury on the conqueror. You could never tell about girls!

Struggling to his feet, the Saddle Sleuth spat the query: "McCorkle gone?"

Widow Bradley nodded. He shook with rage, and when she saw the look in his eyes she was frightened, chilled. He swung into the saddle, and abruptly rode back toward the Bar 6.

"That wall-eyed look!" shuddered Widow Bradley, greatly disturbed. "That man's a killer at heart. I'll bet he's decided to go gunning for Tom. I must watch him."

But the Saddle Sleuth showed no disposition to go gunning for Tom immediately. Instead, he remained at the Bar 6 Ranch, and when night came he took a stroll in the moonlight with Carrie Mason.

Sitting beside Matt Mason on the ranch house porch, Widow Bradley watched the two strollers. The poplars cast long spears of shadow down upon them, and between two of these trees the moon hung low as if suspended in the branches. A mocking bird was singing somewhere nearby.

"Just the kind of a night to turn a girl's head romantic-like," thought Widow Bradley, wishing that Tom McCorkle instead of the Saddle Sleuth was out there with Carrie.

Suddenly she managed to become stricken with an outburst of coughing. Sometime later, when the Saddle Sleuth took his leave from Carrie and swung on down to the bunkhouse, Widow Bradley was still coughing. It was her asthma coming back on her, she explained to the Masons.

WHEN the first streaks of dawn light crept into the east, a tall figure slipped out of the Bar 6 bunkhouse. It was Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth. A bulge against his right hip told that he was carrying a gun. Noiselessly, he saddled up his horse in the corral, and then rode away toward the north.

From the porch of the main house, Widow Bradley saw him go. With asthma as an excuse, she had told the

solicitous Masons that it would be necessary for her to spend the night sitting up, out in the open air, if she expected to get any sleep. So here on the porch she had sat alone in an easy chair throughout the night, though she hadn't slept any. She had been watching—watching for just such a departure as the Saddle Sleuth now made.

Gunning for Tom, was he? Well, she must stop that sort of business.

Ten minutes later, she too departed from the Bar 6 Ranch; noiselessly, unobserved. She too rode to the north. From the top of the first rise, she glimpsed a speeding shape, the Saddle Sleuth's, far beyond. She spurred her horse, hoping to keep him in sight. She was puzzled though, for he was following a mighty roundabout route if he was heading for Tom's Rafter N.

An hour later the morning sun blinked down on the gray-green hills, and found Widow Bradley afoot, searching the ground for the tracks of the Saddle Sleuth's fleet horse. She had been outdistanced; had lost the trail completely. Another hour. The sun was hot now; and her persistent search for some trace of the vanished horse and rider had proved to be entirely futile.

Mopping her perspiring face, Widow Bradley berated herself for her failure. She swung on her horse again, and galloped through the hills toward Tom's ranch. Tom should be warned to be on the lookout for the man. Maybe, even now, she would be too late.

Half an hour later, Widow Bradley started to turn up the trail leading to Tom McCorkle's cabin. Suddenly she ducked out of sight into a cedar-fringed gully. Just beyond, at the foot of the hillslope on which the cabin was located, was Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth!

He was sitting on his horse, peering up sharply toward the house. The rotund little ranch woman crept nearer under cover of the cedars, watching and wondering.

A couple of hours later, three riders pushed up the hillslope to Tom McCorkle's cabin. Slightly in the lead was Tom himself. His lean jaws were hard-set. Blue fire flashed from his eyes. He was unarmed.

Crowding close on either side of him were his quarrelsome neighbor, old Buzz Runyon of the Slash U, and Pickett, the Saddle Sleuth. Runyon was a slouchy, hook-nosed man with spiteful little eyes. He and the Saddle Sleuth held six-shooters in readiness, resting them on their saddle pommels.

As they neared the cabin, the Saddle Sleuth ripped out, "Lookit! That old Bradley woman! What's she doin' here!"

In a chair on the cabin porch, Widow Bradley sat dozing.

"Hey? What—" She blinked, starting up as the riders drew rein a dozen feet away. For a moment she stared at Tom McCorkle, at his two triumphant enemies, at the two guns that menaced him. "What's happened?"

"Plenty!" snapped Runyon. "Tom McCorkle slapped his Rafter N brand on one of my Slash U calves this mornin'. We've got the proof, an' I aim to see that the young smart-Aleck lands behind penitentiary walls, where he belongs."

Widow Bradley sat down again, slowly, staring at them in a half-dazed way.

"So, that's it. See here, Buzz Runyon, such talk is ridiculous. You and Pickett put up your shooting-irons, and stop these scandalous goings-on!"

The Saddle Sleuth received her proposal with a derisive laugh, and Buzz Runyon snarled that this was no place for a woman just now, and that she'd better ride on home where she belonged.

Leaning forward in his saddle, Tom McCorkle spoke. "Thanks, Widow Bradley. But you better not get mixed up in this little ruckus, I reckon. These two skunks—"

"Careful what you say!" threatened the Saddle Sleuth.

"Here, here!" cried Widow Bradley nervously. "Don't prod 'em, Tom. Keep a tight rein on yourself. Somebody, tell me all the facts in this case!"

"The facts ought to prove interestin' to you, since you seem to be a friend of McCorkle's," sneered the Saddle Sleuth. And, while Widow Bradley listened, and Tom McCorkle's eyes shot fire, and old Buzz Runyon jerked spiteful little nods of corroboration, he told this story:

Early that morning, riding near a rocky basin on Runyon's Slash U cattle range, he had spotted a cow and an unbranded calf lying hogtied on the ground; Tom McCorkle at work, using a maverick ring to run a brand on the calf. McCorkle, suddenly detecting Runyon's approach, had jumped on a horse and fled from the scene, carrying with him the maverick ring in its handle-clamp of green sticks.

Then the Saddle Sleuth, so he explained, had ridden up close to examine the cow and calf. He had found the cow to be a Runyon Slash U animal; while the calf, plainly the cow's offspring, had on its ribs a fresh-burned Rafter N, Tom McCorkle's brand. He had hastened to the Slash U ranch house and brought Buzz Runyon to see the evidence of Tom McCorkle's crooked work.

The two of them had gone hunting for McCorkle and had located him on his north section, where he was pretending to be very busy building fence. They had searched him unsuccessfully, hoping to find the maverick ring on his person, and now they had come here to his house.

A maverick ring, such as the Saddle Sleuth accused Tom McCorkle of using, was an iron ring generally about four or five inches in diameter. Because it was small and might be concealed in one's pocket, cattle rustlers sometimes used the maverick ring for branding, first heating it and then utilizing two green sticks of wood to clamp about it and form a handle.

A state law prohibited its use; in fact, the only legitimate branding tool recognized by the state statutes was the old-fashioned "stamp," or "set," branding iron.

"Does anybody else— Does Carrie Mason know what's happened this morning?" inquired Widow Bradley abruptly.

Tom McCorkle stiffened, staring at a pitch-knot on the cabin wall.

The Saddle Sleuth laughed. "She knows all about it by this time, I reckon. Runyon sent his boy Jed to bring Matt Mason. We want folks to see the evidence with their own eyes."

"An' we've got plenty evidence," Buzz Runyon informed Widow Bradley vindictively. "Pickett here was an eyewitness. We've got the two different brands of my cow an' calf as proof. Besides, I've seen the imprint of a ring in the ashes of the brandin' fire we found in that basin, which bears out Pickett's story that McCorkle was usin' a maverick ring.

"If we kin find that outlawed brandin' tool—if McCorkle hid it some'eres on these premises instead of throwin' it away—it'll plumb clinch our evidence agin him. Then I'll have a shore-fire case that'll convict in any court!"

"Men have been sent to jail on less evidence," Widow Bradley admitted. She glanced uneasily at the Saddle Sleuth, at his gun. "My, my! Things sure look kinda bad for you, Tom. Ain't you got no alibi to offset these charges?"

"No." Tom's voice was dry, unnatural. It was evident that he was struggling to control himself. "Up until these two brilliant detectives showed up, I'd been on my north section alone ever since sunup, stringing fence. No alibi! Nothing to fight this pack of lies—nothing except my word against this lyin' skunk's!" He

whirled sharply, flinging the words at the Saddle Sleuth.

The latter's dark face twitched. He started to raise his gun from the saddle pommel. Tom leaned sidewise, as if getting ready to leap straight at the muzzle of the weapon.

"Go easy, Tom!" shrilled Widow Bradley in warning. "Don't you dare blow up. If you start for that man, you'll get drilled in the middle of your first jump."

Buzz Runyon intervened, saying something in an undertone to the Saddle Sleuth. They dismounted, ordering Tom McCorkle to do likewise.

"Step aside, Widder Bradley," said Runyon shortly. "We're gonna search this house."

Frowning, she stepped back a pace, and leaned against the cabin wall, her hands shoved into the pockets of her divided buckskin skirt. With Tom McCorkle in front of their guns, the two investigators pushed up on the porch.

"You've got no right in this house!" declared Widow Bradley suddenly, barring their way. "See here, Pickett! You claim to be a detective. Do you carry an officer's badge and credentials?"

"No," the Saddle Sleuth admitted, scowling. "This here is a private case."

Buzz Runyon blinked at him in surprise. "I was sorta under the impression that you had a deppity's commission, Pickett. No matter, though. We'll turn McCorkle over to the sheriff, soon as we look over these premises."

"You've got no right to arrest Tom, and you've got no lawful right to search this house without a search warrant, unless Tom gives his consent," cried Widow Bradley in triumph. "Evidence obtained by illegal search ain't admissible in court.

"Findin' a maverick ring in this house won't help your case against Tom one mite, unless your search is legalized by a search warrant or by Tom's consent. And I might remind you too that the law provides a stiff penalty for breaking into a man's house while armed."

Runyon batted his little eyes, nonplused for a moment.

"Don't pay no attention to the old female!" began the Saddle Sleuth furiously.

"Let's don't git too all-fired hasty," said Runyon doubtfully. "I reckon the widder's right about this search warrant business."

He and the Saddle Sleuth began to wrangle. The latter insisted that they go ahead and search the house. But Runyon was of the opinion that it would be better to take Tom McCorkle on in to the sheriff at Goldenrod and delay the search until they could procure the warrant. Tom McCorkle was eyeing them contemptuously. He started to speak, but Widow Bradley checked him.

"Let me handle this, Tom!" she whispered, stepping to his side. "You must!"

He hestitated a moment. "Maybe you're more level-headed than I am, Widow Bradley," he admitted at last. "Go ahead. As far as a maverick ring is concerned, they won't find one in my house, unless that tricky skunk—" His eyes bored toward the Saddle Sleuth, and he frowned.

"I've got to find some way of getting 'em to lay down their guns," Widow Bradley breathed, desperately. "Otherwise, I'm afraid there'll be a big blow-up pronto, and somebody will get killed."

She addressed Runyon and the Saddle Sleuth. "I'm speaking for Tom now. He'll consent to you searching his house, on condition that you unload your guns and leave 'em on the ground outside here. Tom'll tell me if he's got any shooting-irons in the house, and I'll bring 'em out and add 'em to the pile.

"That'll make the odds more even. He won't interfere with your search,

and if you find the evidence you're looking for, you can give it to the sheriff along with the charges you intend to file against Tom."

"No!" howled the Saddle Sleuth.

"Why not?" Runyon shot at him, impatiently, after a moment's thought. "I don't see anything wrong with the idee. We'll be two to McCorkle's one, if he tries any funny business. And, with his consent given to a search, anything we find kin be used as evidence agin him."

Widow Bradley brought Tom McCorkle's guns, a six-shooter and a rifle, out of the cabin. She laid them on the ground, first ejecting the cartridges. Buzz Runyon unloaded his six-gun and tossed it aside. Reluctantly, the Saddle Sleuth did the same. Then, with Tom leading the way, they pushed into the cabin, Widow Bradley being the last to enter.

The search began. The Saddle Sleuth looked in a box cupboard nailed to the wall; lifted the lid of a tool chest and rummaged hurriedly through its assorted contents—the carpenter tools, pieces of leather, a bridle bit, a rat trap mounted on an oblong piece of wood. Buzz Runyon took no part in the search; he was on the alert to stop any hostile move Tom McCorkle might attempt.

Tom stood with folded arms, grimly watching. The finding of a maverick ring in his house would clinch the evidence against him, as Runyon had said. This was serious, desperate business. He realized he was gripped in a schemer's trap; and the schemer's very insistence on making a search led him to suspect that a maverick ring had been planted somewhere in the house without his knowledge!

No word had been spoken. Outside, a gust of wind howled through the cedars.

"This looks like a good hidin' place," said the Saddle Sleuth abruptly.

There was something in his tone and manner hinting that the search was nearing an end. He had stepped behind the sheet-iron heating stove, and was pointing toward a hidden recess, three feet wide and a couple of feet high, which was enclosed by the outer wall and by a sheathing of boards nailed to the studding inside.

He started to reach down into the enclosure, but desisted as a clamor of hoofs sounded outside. A rattle of flying gravel against the cabin told of a horse being thrown back on its haunches. Into the room dashed Carrie Mason, bareheaded, her dark hair torn to confusion by the wind.

For a moment the girl stared at the faces in the room.

"Miss Carrie!" The Saddle Sleuth sprang to her side, his lips twisted in a smile of triumph. "Runyon's boy Jed brung you and yore father word, I reckon—about McCorkle. We've got the proof."

"Yes. Jed Runyon brought the news to the Bar 6. And he took us over to a rocky basin on his father's Slash U range, and showed us that cow and calf. Dad will be here before long. But I—I've seen enough—"

"Enough to convince you that McCorkle's a cow thief, huh?" the Saddle Sleuth exulted.

Carrie Mason flashed straight to Tom McCorkle before she answered.

"Tom!" she cried, a catch in her voice. "I don't believe a word of this story about you!" Her brown eyes, afire with scorn and fury, turned back to the Saddle Sleuth. "If that man says you did all this, Tom, he's just plain lying!"

"Carrie!" said Tom huskily. "You mean—"

"I mean that this terrible thing has made me realize all of a sudden that I've been loving you for months—years," she half whispered, as his hands caught hers. "Oh, why couldn't I have realized it before? But at least I can stand by you now, Tom. No matter what they do to you—no matter how much trouble these men cause you—I aim to stand by you!"

The Saddle Sleuth stood stunned,

staring incredulously at the two. Buzz Runyon shrugged, impatient at the delay. And Widow Bradley, who from the time she followed the men into the cabin had been as silent and meek as a mouse, suddenly became animated. Beaming with approval, she remarked enthusiastically that Carrie was standing by Tom something grand, and she was proud of them both.

"Folks, this settles everything," she called briskly. "Now we can forget this disgraceful business, and all go home."

"It don't settle nothin'!" yelled Buzz Runyon contrarily. "I aim to press my charges agin McCorkle to the limit."

The Saddle Sleuth still gaped incredulously at Carrie Mason. Finally he shook himself together. "So, you're ready to marry this cow thief, huh?" he raged. "Well, mebby yore father won't be so keen on the idea. Mebby he'll object to his daughter marryin' a convict."

Whirling, he sprang again behind the sheet-iron stove, and shouted, "If I can find the maverick ring I'm lookin' for, it'll clinch the proof agin McCorkle, and he can take his medicine in jail."

"Why don't you let the matter rest!" grumbled Widow Bradley.

Tom McCorkle's jaws were hard-set. He was watching the Saddle Sleuth closely, suspiciously. That hombre seemed mighty cocksure about finding a maverick ring here! Carrie was clinging to Tom's arms; was whispering to him. But he didn't catch her words. He was watching the Saddle Sleuth—watching the man thrust his right hand far down into the recess between the walls.

Suddenly there sounded a sharp click. The Saddle Sleuth leaped back spasmodically, howling. He jumped about the room, cursing, yelling. Dangling tenaciously from his right hand was a rat trap.

Old Buzz Runyon blinked, and said he'd be durned! Tom McCorkle and Carrie blinked too. So great was the confusion of the moment that the arrival of Matt Mason attracted no attention. Outdistanced by Carrie in her swift ride to Tom's cabin, Mason had just now arrived, and was stepping down from his horse near the porch.

Of the five people inside the cabin, Widow Bradley alone had shown no surprise over the disaster attaching itself to the Saddle Sleuth's inquisitive fingers.

"Showdown, folks!" she now called out sharply, bouncing forward. "Let me explain this. You see, I'm a kinda saddle sleuth myself. This man Pickett has gone to a lot of work, manufacturin' evidence so as to get Tom in trouble. It was him who put that Rafter N brand of Tom's on Runyon's Slash U calf."

The Saddle Sleuth recoiled; then lunged a step toward her. "Prove it!" he snarled threateningly.

"Prove it I will!" she retorted. "Less than three hours ago, I saw you carry a maverick ring into this cabin. After you vamoosed, I hunted till I found where you'd hidden the ring, and I planted one of Tom's rat traps in its place.

"That maverick ring was in my pocket when you and Runyon rode up with Tom. Before I followed you men into the house, I sorta disposed of the ring. Look!" And she pointed out the open door, toward the saddled horses standing outside.

There was a rush to the door. Four pairs of eyes followed her pointing finger. On the Saddle Sleuth's handsome black horse, circling the saddle horn, where Widow Bradley had placed it, was a large iron ring—a maverick ring.

Buzz Runyon whirled toward the Saddle Sleuth, yelling angrily. "So it *was* a frame-up, jest like Widder Bradley says, huh? And you lied to me too, so's to ring me in on yore game!"

The Saddle Sleuth quailed; stepped back a pace. He saw Tom McCorkle,

clenched fists already swinging, making for him. His hand dropped instinctively but futilely to his empty holster. Then, whirling suddenly, he made a dash to escape out the doorway. But Matt Mason, who had stood outside on the porch, listening, thrust a big foot in his path; tripped him; poked the muzzle of a loaded six-shooter in his ribs.

"Guilty as hell, ain't you, Mister Saddle Sleuth!" roared Mason in disgust. "Well, don't be in sech a big hurry to crawl yore hoss and ride out o' this country. When you ride out, it'll be on a rail, and I'll be holdin' one end."

A minute later Tom McCorkle stepped to Widow Bradley's side and extended his hand, smiling down at her.

"Thanks, Widow Bradley," he said gratefully.

His arm was about Carrie Mason, and the girl's brown eyes had never glowed so softly.

"Why, about the only thing I did was inveigle that Saddle Sleuth man into parting with his gun before he killed somebody," Widow Bradley said composedly. "From there on, I let him have his own way.

"But he needed to be taught a lesson, after the scandalous way he tried to meddle in the love affair between you two. Folks shouldn't meddle in love affairs. It only leads to harm, and no earthly good can come from it."

MOUNT CAPULIN

IN twenty minutes you can drive up a corkscrew highway from the flat country of northeastern New Mexico to the awe-inspiring rim of Mt. Capulin, 10,000 feet above sea level. In the early days Capulin's tall cone was a guide post and landmark to cattle trailers, freighters, scouts, buffalo hunters and immigrants.

To-day it is set aside as a National Monument, chiefly because it is said to be the most perfectly preserved extinct volcano cone in North America. Its bowl is now largely timbered with scrub juniper and piñon, a veritable park, covering an area of about seven hundred acres.

From its rim, on clear days, you can see Pike's Peak, 200 miles away to the northwest in Colorado, and on any day you have a magnificent view of the Sangre de Cristo Range where Kit Carson and his mountain men roamed and trapped for fur.

Down from the skirts of the mountain, huge streams of once molten lava reach out like fingers in almost every direction, disappearing, finally, in the grassy stretches of eastern New Mexico cattle country.

Though hundreds of tourists visit the famous crater, the country roundabout remains "cow range" to a large extent. For among the finest sights from Mt. Capulin is often the view of far-scattered herds of grazing cattle.

TRAIL'S END EDITOR:

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The Fifth Notch

By Herbert A. Woodbury

Here is a story of two lovers you'll adore. A real Western girl who could be trusted to keep her head when guns were smoking, and to be sweet and gentle with the one man in the world for her. And that man; quiet, easy-like, but plumb poison on the trigger—so sure about what he was doing, in fighting and in love.

FOR several moments before he either spoke or interfered, Joe Anderson, owner of the Bar B Ranch, had watched the tawny-haired young cowpuncher who was so busily at work at the far end of the bunkhouse. Then, Joe's curiosity getting the better of him, he wandered down the long double row of beds to where Larry Taylor sat on the edge of his bunk, cramming shirts and trousers and knickknacks into a canvas duffel bag.

"What you up to, Larry?" Joe asked.

At Joe's voice, the younger man glanced up. And Joe experienced a quite definite shock as he looked into the youth's face. Larry's ordinarily grinning and sunny features seemed strangely gaunt and drawn.

"I'm packin'," Larry said. Then, without further efforts at conversation, he returned to his work.

Joe's leathery forehead furrowed. "I ain't so dumb but what I figgered out that much, all by myself," he said. "But what's the idea? You ain't quittin' us?"

Larry continued with his packing. "Yeah," he said, "I'm quittin' you."

Joe dropped down on the bunk beside the youth. "Look here, Larry," he said. "If we ain't been treatin' you right, lately, you might at least have come to a fellow and told him what it was that was gittin' your goat."

It was a remark which seemed to get a rise out of the boy. He paused and glanced up at Joe, and this time his blue eyes momentarily smiled with a little of their old warmth and good nature. It was this good nature of Larry's, incidentally, which explained why Joe was so loath to see him packing. Joe liked cheerful riders on his payroll, and he liked Larry in particular.

"Oh, you've treated me all right," Larry said. "A lot better'n all right, now that I think it over. Only—well, I've jest got to be driftin'. That's all."

With that, Larry drew the strings of his warbag tight, and tied them. Then, suddenly, he dropped down on his hands and knees and crawled part

way under his bunk. In a second, he stood up, a gunbelt and a holster in his hand.

Joe blinked, but it was not because Larry had fished a weapon out from under the bed. To be sure, most of Joe's riders owned guns.

"Gosh!" Joe declared. "Where on earth did you ever resurrect that ancient blunderbuss? Out of the ark?"

Larry's lips twitched faintly. "Oh, it's pretty ancient, all right," he admitted, "but then, you see, it would be. It—it was Dad's."

Just then Joe's keen eyes had suddenly noticed a detail which had at first escaped him. "Your Dad," he said, "carved them notches there in the handle, did he?"

Larry shook his head. "My brother Tom carved the notches, after Dad was killed."

"I see," said Joe. But for the moment he didn't see. "You mean," he commenced, "that your brother Tom—"

"Twenty years ago," Larry interrupted him suddenly, "Dad was held up and robbed by five armed men. And in the general ruckus he was killed. I was jest a tiny kid at the time, but Tom, he was a grown man. And Tom went out after Dad's killers—see?"

Joe's eyes narrowed. "Five men, you say? But there's only four notches."

Larry Taylor smiled. "You got sharp eyes, Joe," he said. "Yeah, four notches is correct. There's one still missin'." So saying, Larry bent over to pick up his duffel. He swung it up over his broad shoulders and started toward the door.

Joe was after him in a couple of swift bounds. "Look here, youngster," he commenced. "You don't mean that *you*. . . ."

Larry reached into the pocket of his blue shirt and drew out a crumpled piece of paper. "I wasn't goin' to show this to you, Joe," he said. "It didn't seem like nobody's business but my own. But I reckon they ain't no harm in your lookin' at it. Here." And Larry held out the bit of paper.

Joe's fingers trembled a little as he took it. Then his eyes opened very wide as he read it. It was short and to the point. It said:

> Tom Taylor—if you're still looking for Donaldson, come to Fort Verde, and register at the Palace Hotel. I'll git in touch with you and give you the rest of the dope as soon as you git here.

That was all. The note was unsigned.

"But it's addressed to your brother!" Joe cried.

"Naturally," said Larry. "'Cause it was Tom that started out to avenge Dad, jest like I told you. But Tom's dead now, so the note was forwarded to me."

"And now, you. . . ."

"Yeah," said Larry. "Now it's up to me, I reckon."

The two of them had stepped outside by this time, and Larry was already swinging up aboard his roan.

Joe stepped forward to seize the pony's reins. And, hardened and used to life as Joe was, he felt his eyes suddenly fill with tears, in spite of himself. The boy looked so young there in the sunlight which filtered through the cottonwoods. And his ponderous, notched gun seemed such incongruous equipment.

Why, he was just a kid! Calculating rapidly, Joe figured that he'd been only two or three when his father had been killed. He'd been so young that, at the time, he probably hadn't even known what had happened. Yet here he was, now, starting out to end in some dramatic way a story whose violence he had never even witnessed.

"Look here, kid," Joe commenced. "You've been happy all these years, ain't you? Do you honestly think you can make yourself any happier if you—"

But Larry cut him off. "When I come back, Joe," he said, "—if I do come back—there'll be five notches in Dad's old gun."

Then the boy wheeled his roan. Touching the pony lightly with his

dull-roweled spurs, he was off toward the pass in the blue foothills which shimmered along the horizon.

THREE days later, Larry Taylor registered at the Palace Hotel in Fort Verde. And—remembering that the anonymous note had been addressed to his brother and not to himself—he signed Tom's name on the blotter. This was just to make things easier for whoever wanted to get in touch with him.

He flashed the desk clerk a smile. "Ain't anybody here yet waitin' for me, is there?"

The clerk inspected the signature, scratched his head in an effort to recall, and then replied in the negative.

"Nope. I don't think so. Why? Expectin' somebody, was you?"

"Yeah," said Larry, slightly disappointed. He brightened up again, however, and added, "He's prob'ly givin' me time to git here, though. I reckon he'll be in, in the course of the day. And say, bud, when he does come in, show him up to me right away, will you? It's—it's important, and I won't be goin' nowhere in the meantime."

"Okay," said the clerk.

With this, Larry went up to his room, took off his boots, and sprawled out on the bed. Well, there was nothing to do now, he guessed, except to kill time until his mysterious informer turned up. Because, until then, his hands were tied.

As he lay back on the bed, thoughtful and reflective, Larry wondered for a second who this mysterious person who had written the note might be. He wondered, too, what had prompted the note. Then, relaxing a little after his three strenuous days in the saddle, he ceased his speculations. After all, it really didn't matter who had written to him or why. All that did matter was Donaldson.

Larry continued to rest, up in his room, until lunch time. Then he came downstairs again.

The desk clerk beckoned to him as he entered the lobby. "You was the gent who was lookin' for somebody, wasn't you?"

"That's right," said Larry. "You mean he showed up?"

"He?"

"Why—why, yes, I guess so," Larry faltered.

"Then I reckon I made a mistake, after all," the clerk said.

"Mistake?"

"Yeah. While you was upstairs, mister, a girl came in and asked to see the register. She run her finger down the list of names, and I sort of thought it hesitated a minute when it come to yours."

Larry suddenly caught his breath. For no particular reason, he felt a little thrill run up and down his spine. A girl? Larry was young enough to be romantic, and a rather pleasant thought popped into his head. Maybe this girl was in trouble. Maybe Donaldson was threatening her in some way. Maybe she'd written the letter.

"Well," said Larry, "I'll tell you. It might have been a girl I was to meet, for all I really know. Did—did she say anything?"

The desk clerk frowned a second. "She did an' she didn't," he told Larry. "When I seen her finger restin' there, opposite your name, I asked her if she wanted to see you. And for some reason she seemed to git all hot an' bothered. Blushed like fury, she did. Said she was lookin' for somebody else. Then she beat it out of here."

"H'm-m," said Larry. "That's funny."

The desk clerk nodded. "That's what I thought, too. Though she might have been tellin' the truth. Maybe she was lookin' for some boy friend she expected in town. And maybe I embarrassed her."

"Probably," Larry agreed. But he added, "Know who she was, do you?"

"Sally Fuller. Her dad owns a river ranch up the Verde a bit."

"Fuller—huh?" Larry repeated the name thoughtfully. "Well, I reckon if she does want me, she'll be back."

"I reckon," said the clerk.

And Larry wandered into the hotel dining room to eat lunch. He took his time with the meal. After that, he took his time reading innumerable newspapers in the lobby. As a matter of fact, he killed the entire afternoon just sitting around, on the chance that the girl might return.

She didn't return, though. Nor did anyone else come in looking for Larry. Consequently that young man frowned rather thoughtfully at supper time. He had always hated inaction and waiting. Furthermore, in this particular instance, he was puzzled by it, too. It seemed rather logical, for instance, that whoever had written him to come here should waste no time in getting in touch with him. For the moment, he half wondered whether the letter could have been a hoax. Still, a hoax didn't quite make sense.

Larry went to bed, that night, still puzzled. By noon of the following day he was not only puzzled but was annoyed, because the long morning had gone by just as uneventfully as the previous day. No one had come in looking for him. No one had sent any message. It occurred to Larry that he was face to face with something of a mystery. He'd been invited here on a promise of finding Donaldson. And now that he'd arrived, no one seemed in any mood to make good on that promise. Peculiar!

He debated over the idea of riding up the Verde to look for this Fuller girl. But his common sense persuaded him not to. For, after all, there was no real bit of evidence to link her up with this business.

So, instead of riding out to look for the Fuller girl, Larry put on his hat and sauntered down Fort Verde's dusty and treeless main street toward the squat dobe courthouse. He'd get in touch with the sheriff, make some discreet inquiries concerning Donaldson on his own initiative, and . . .

Larry left his thoughts and plans suddenly suspended in midair. For, just as he drew near the courthouse, something quite exciting occurred. A little way ahead of him a buckboard rattled up to the curb. A powerfully built and rather bulldog-faced man of about forty vaulted down over the wheel. He turned and held out his hand to assist his young girl companion to alight. At the same moment, a small boy rushed down the courthouse steps, twirling a lariat. He paused as he reached the sidewalk, braced himself, and made a toss—straight for the man who had just alighted from the buckboard!

The next was all action. The boy's rope very neatly descended over the man's shoulders. The girl shouted something at the boy. Larry noticed suddenly, then, that she was dressed all in white, from her slippers to what looked like a wreath of orange blossoms on her chestnut hair.

With a single, powerful movement of his arms, the man managed to slip out of the noose. He turned and made a lunge for the boy, and Larry saw him lift a blow from his very boot-tops. The boy managed to sidestep adroitly. Otherwise, the man's blow might very well have knocked him senseless.

Larry waited for no more. He and a number of others in the vicinity commenced running forward. But it was Larry who reached the scene first. He seized the bulldog-faced man's shoulder and whirled him savagely about before he could aim another blow at the boy. Instantly, the man shifted his attack to Larry. The latter took a terrific punch in his face which sent him reeling backward. But if Larry's nose smarted in consequence, his brain smarted, too. This bully, here, had been about to strike a small boy a blow like that, had he?

Larry rebounded into the fight, suddenly seeing red. He struck out in sheer, unreasoning fury. Ordinarily a good boxer, he forgot all his science and cunning, just now. He simply slugged. And the roar of the crowd rang meaninglessly in his ears. He

jarred his opponent with a body blow, just over the heart. He opened an angry cut above the man's eye. Then he drove a perfect blow to the tip of the man's chin. The man with the bulldog face went careening backward. His legs crumpled beneath him. His head struck the sidewalk. After that he didn't move.

Larry staggered back a bit limply himself. He was exhausted and out of breath, and for an instant or so everything was a confused blur. He was dimly conscious, though, that the small boy was at his side, vigorously pumping his hand.

"Gee, mister," the boy cried, "that was sure swell of you! You sure pulverized him."

Then, as the buzzing ceased in Larry's ears, he heard some of the comments from the crowd which had collected.

"Good for you, stranger. Ben Wilson's had that comin' to him for years."

What happened next, though, was in a startlingly different vein. The girl who had been riding in the buckboard with Wilson suddenly stepped forward to face Larry.

"You—you've beaten Ben unmercifully!" she cried.

And Larry didn't notice that she spoke more as if she were in a dazed trance than as if she were really angry. Stung, and startled, Larry flared up at once. "And what should I have done? Let him half kill the kid here?"

He was sorry immediately for speaking so hotly, for he saw the girl wince at his words. She seemed to close her eyes tightly for a second. Then, suddenly, she burst into tears.

The small boy flew to her. "Why, sis," he cried, "what's the matter? I'd think you'd be glad. Me an' my friend here thought we was helpin' you."

The girl stopped crying. She put her arm about the boy, and her voice was very gentle as she answered him. "I know, Buddy," she said. "You meant all right. But Ben's our friend, now." Then she seemed to realize that something of an explanation was due Larry. Turning to him, she said:

"Excuse me if you thought I was taking you to task a minute ago. You did right, of course. You couldn't very well have done anything else. Only there's been a sort of misunderstanding all around. Buddy didn't know what a mistake he was making when he roped Ben. And I—I was upset, I reckon. I didn't know what I was saying when I spoke to you."

Larry blinked stupidly. He only half heard what she was saying. And still less did he understand it. She had composed herself in very short order, and he caught his breath and marveled at her very quiet, very feminine dignity. He noticed for the first time how young she was. Her long white dress fitted in at the waist with a tight bodice effect over her small, almost boyish figure. Her chestnut hair, surmounted by its orange blossoms, blew lightly about her forehead. Her blue eyes were frank and direct.

Larry groped with difficulty for the right sort of response to make. Then there was an interruption, and he was saved the embarrassment of speaking.

A tall, exceedingly handsome gentleman with a six-pointed star on his leather vest suddenly elbowed his way forward. He turned to the girl.

"I saw the whole thing from my window," he said, "and believe me it was as low-down an exhibition as I've ever witnessed. I'll see to it that Ben gits six months for this, Sally."

Larry started as if he had been struck. Sally! Why, that was the name of the girl who'd come to the hotel and who'd asked to see the register!

But he left the thought incomplete, for the girl's next words called him back to what was going on about him.

He saw her lift her hand to her mouth to stifle an agonized little cry. Her voice rose in instant entreaty.

"But, Mr. Thayer," she cried, "I—I don't want Ben locked up. Please, oh, please don't do it!"

Sheriff Thayer staggered back, his

brown eyes blinking in bewilderment. "Don't lock him up?" he echoed stupidly. "Good Lord, Sally, have you gone crazy?"

Larry saw her smile ever so faintly. "No . . ." she said, "I haven't gone crazy. Though the chances are that you won't understand. A minute before all this happened, Ben and I were on our way to the courthouse to get a marriage license."

Buddy seemed to find his voice ahead of the others.

"And I wasn't goin' to let 'em, Sheriff," he cried. "And you mustn't let 'em, either. Sis, she hates Ben. She's told me so more'n a million times, I'll bet. She hates him like sin."

The girl whirled on her brother with an excited, "Shush, Buddy."

But the boy had worked himself up to such a pitch that he couldn't be silenced.

"Ben—he's poison, Sheriff. You know it as well as I do. And if sis marries him, it'll only be because Ben's found some way of makin' her do it."

The girl's voice became thin and brittle with alarm. "Buddy," she cried, almost in tears, "be quiet, I tell you! You don't know what you're saying." Then, very resolutely, she turned back to the sheriff. "You won't lock Ben up, will you?"

Sheriff Thayer frowned. "By gosh, Sally," he said, "I don't know, now. I'd sure ought to." He added, though, "You mean to tell me you're in love with him?"

It was a question which Larry heard only dimly. For the last half-dozen seconds Larry had stood motionless, frozen utterly to stone. It seemed to him that his very heart had stopped beating. Even his breath came chokingly. And now, with eyes which saw but still didn't see, he watched the girl shudder at the sheriff's question. Her voice was very steady, however.

"Yes," she said, "I am."

"And your dad gives his consent?"

"I don't need Dad's consent. I'm over eighteen."

"In other words, you ain't got his consent?"

"I tell you, I'm over eighteen." And then, in the same breath, she whirled to face Larry. "He—he hasn't any right to lock Ben up if I don't want him to, has he?" she implored.

"I—I don't know," Larry managed to stammer. "I mean—look here, ma'am; suppose we take him to the hospital for the time bein'? After all, he can't be locked up or married, either, till he's had his head dressed."

It was a common sense solution which seemed to dispose of further argument. Sheriff Thayer and Sally walked over to where Ben still lay, out cold.

And Larry pounced breathlessly upon Buddy. "Look here, kid. Your—your last name's Fuller, ain't it?"

"That's right," said the boy. And then he added, "Why, what's the matter, mister? You're tremblin'."

Larry forced a smile. Trembling, was he? Well, maybe he was. Or maybe he was crying. He didn't quite know. All he did know was that he had witnessed a drama in the last few minutes which had torn his heart and wrenched his very soul. All he knew was that he was no longer quite the same young man who had so blithely left the Bar B with his father's gun on his hip.

Sally Fuller! Still, Buddy's information hadn't come as a surprise or a shock. Before Buddy had told him, he'd known that she was the girl who'd asked to see the register at the Palace, yesterday. He'd known why, too, ever since Buddy had cried out, "And if sis marries Ben, it's only because he's found some way of makin' her do it."

Fighting back his unmasculine tears, Larry pushed through the crowd to where Sally Fuller and Sheriff Thayer were hoisting Ben's still inert form up into the buckboard. He watched the girl climb up into the front seat. He saw her tanned face in profile—set, determined and very brave. Her little

chin was up. She was staring straight in front of her.

Poor, sweet, little kid! He hesitated, and then, just as Sally whipped up her ponies, he started forward. He made a running jump for the hub of the front wheel, and vaulted up into the seat beside the girl.

She flashed him a startled glance. "Why . . . why. . . ."

"Let's not drive him to the hospital," said Larry. "I reckon if his head's as hard as his heart is, he'll come to without medical assistance. I've got a better plan."

Her eyes met his, earnestly. "But you don't understand!"

Larry reached over to take the reins from her. And as he did so, he caught her hands firmly in his.

"Maybe," he said gently, "I understand more'n you think." He glanced up the street to see the desert, green and tawny and gold, beckoning them ahead. He drove in that direction. Then, as Fort Verde fell away, he turned to her, flushed and suddenly radiant. "I'd like to tell you a story," he began; "one that commenced twenty years ago."

"Twenty years ago?" She moved defensively away from him.

"Yeah," said Larry, trying to reassure her with his eyes. "Twenty years ago. At that time there was a man named . . . well, it don't really matter what his name was, 'cause he's changed it since then.

"We'll call him Smith. Jones would do, jest as well. He was pretty young, twenty years ago, I reckon. And maybe a little bit wild. Not really bad, though, even if some of his friends maybe was. They—these friends of his—talked him into committin' highway robbery." Larry broke off for a second to steal a glance at the girl. "You—you've heard this story, have you?"

Her eyes flamed up in challenge. "Who are you?" she wanted to know.

Larry smiled reassuringly, and whipped the buckboard ponies from a jog to a stiffer trot. "I'll tell you a little more of the story," he said. "As I said, Smith got talked into a robbery. But he didn't have any idea that there was goin' to be a murder incidental to that robbery, did he?"

"No," said Sally, "he didn't. . . ." And Larry saw a little color come back into her cheeks.

"I didn't think so," said Larry, "because if he'd really been rotten, that way, he'd never have been able to persuade such a lovely girl to marry him."

"You knew his wife?"

"No," said Larry, "I didn't. But I had the pleasure of meetin' the two fine kids she raised. So I know she must have been lovely. Jest like I know for the same reason that Smith wasn't a murderer."

He cleared his throat. "Still—there was murder committed at this robbery. And, technically, of course, Smith was jest as guilty as the other four. Actually, though, he wasn't. And maybe that's the reason why the good Lord let him escape and gave him another chance. Anyway, he did escape. And he married this fine girl like I told you about, and raised them two fine kids.

"And then . . ." Larry's voice dropped a little, "then, one day, things stopped goin' so well for Smith. Somebody got wind of his secret."

"His foreman," said Sally.

Larry nodded. "His foreman, then. And I'd like to make a little comparison, here. Smith, I've told you, wasn't really bad. But this foreman was rotten, clear down to the core. Armed with this information, he went to. . . ."

"To Smith's daughter," said Sally.

"Yeah," said Larry, "he would go to the daughter instead of to Smith himself, of course. And he threatened to expose her dad unless she married him. At first, though, she refused to marry him, so he sent a note—"

Sally interrupted him. "She didn't refuse," Sally corrected him. "At first she wouldn't believe him. That's why he sent the note—to show her that he wasn't bluffing."

"He told her about the note, then?"

"He showed it to her before he sent it. But she still thought he was bluffing, until—"

"Of course," said Larry, "until she went to the Palace, saw the name Tom Taylor on the register, and realized that the note had actually produced results. Then she knew that unless she married the foreman right away, he'd git in touch with this Tom Taylor, and—"

He broke off a little breathlessly, for the sound of groans came to them from their burden in the rear. He pushed the reins back into the girl's hands, and climbed nimbly over the back of the seat. In an instant, he was tying Ben's hands with his bandanna. Then he bound up the man's feet with his neckerchief.

Larry saw Sally frown at this maneuver. He flashed her a grin. "There's more to the story, though, you know," he told her. "It turned out that the man registered there at the Palace wasn't Tom Taylor. Tom might have been difficult to deal with. But the man at the Palace was his kid brother, Larry. Larry saved Smith's daughter from marryin' the foreman."

Sally, however, shook her head. "Is—is it as simple as all that?" she wanted to know. "We'll say that Larry changed his mind about getting his revenge on Smith. That's evident enough, of course. But that doesn't make Ben change his mind, too, does it? If he can't have Smith's daughter, what's to prevent his going in to Sheriff Thayer, and . . ."

Larry climbed back into the front seat and took the reins again. "He can't go to Thayer while we keep him tied up, can he?"

"No, and we can't keep him tied up forever, either."

"We could keep him tied up for a day or so, couldn't we? Till we figured out a plan?"

Sally's blue eyes came up to meet his. "It'd have to be a pretty good plan," she said. "Remember, Smith's daughter loves him. He—Smith—is an invalid, you see. That's why his daughter was able to run off with Ben without his knowing or interfering."

Larry felt a lump in his throat as he answered. "Don't worry," he said; "it—it will be a good plan." Then, impulsively, he reached for her hand. She gave it to him without protest, and Larry felt her fingers tighten over his.

TWO days later, Larry and Sally sat side by side in the front seat of the buckboard. And for the second time they drove over the bright expanse of desert between the Fuller ranch and Fort Verde. Only, this time, they made the drive in the opposite direction. And, this time, Ben Wilson wasn't tied up in the rear. Ben—so at least one of the two there in the buckboard thought—was locked in a tightly shuttered shed, back at the ranch.

"Game?" Sally repeated the question Larry had just asked her. "Why, of course I'm game. Though I don't know yet what I'm supposed to be game about."

She was hinting, possibly, that Larry owed her an explanation for this sudden drive to town. But Larry didn't rise to her hint. Instead, he suddenly handed her a gun. "I picked this up out at the ranch," he told her, "jest before we started. You know how to use it, I reckon?"

"Of course," said Sally, "but. . . ."

"Well," said Larry, "if we should be attacked along here, anywhere, and if I should go down shootin' while I tried to protect you, it wouldn't be murder if you was able to pot the guy who got me, would it?"

Sally caught her breath in a quick gasp—and Larry smiled at her.

"I only said *if*," he told her. "You see that gun of yours ain't to be fired unless I miss with mine. Naturally, though, I ain't expectin' to miss with mine."

Then, before Sally could demand further explanations, Larry suddenly

tensed. "I reckon we'd better not talk any more," he said, and he handed the reins to Sally.

They were just approaching the rim of a sand wash which cut deeply through the dobe desert floor. The trail, when it came to the wash, would dip sharply down into a thicket of mesquites whose lacy tree tops bobbed up just a little over the edge.

Larry's eyes narrowed shrewdly. His fingers wandered to the heavy walnut stock of his father's revolver. He let the gun remain in its holster, though. Because, as he told himself, "I'll give him the same chance I'd planned on givin' Donaldson—an even draw."

Poised and tense, then, Larry waited breathlessly while Sally, all unsuspecting, drove the buckboard nearer the arroyo's rim. Then Larry's eyes suddenly caught the movement up ahead which he had been looking for in every clump of mesquite, every group of palo verdes and every thicket of cat's-claw along the trail. A man's arm moved, there amid the green of the branches. A bit of metal gleamed, blue-steel, in the sunlight.

Larry's own hand moved like lightning, now. Then two shots, so close together that they might have been simultaneous, blasted the desert stillness. Larry fell over heavily against Sally, and the buckboard ponies bolted.

Five minutes later, Sally had the buckboard ponies under control. And Larry, in spite of his shoulder, was able to help her tie up the team so that the two of them could leave the vehicle and investigate.

As they came down into the mesquites of the arroyo on foot, Larry thought for a moment that Sally was going to faint. She gasped, "Why, it's Ben!" and then commenced trembling.

Larry tried to feign a decent surprise. "He must have escaped, somehow," he said.

But Sally turned to stare at him very hard. "You mean that you. . . ."

Larry nodded. "To go back to the story I was tellin' you a few days ago," he said; "you'll remember that the foreman was rotten to the core. He deserved to die if any man ever did. But of course I couldn't go in and shoot him down, even so. So. . . ."

"So you left the door of the shed unlocked. . . ."

"The window," said Larry; "and I put a gun where he could conveniently find it."

"But how'd he know we'd be coming along the trail here?"

Larry smiled faintly. "I told him," he said. "I told him you and I was drivin' in town to be married. I kidded him about it. I already knew he had a temper, you see. I taunted him till he got so ravin' mad that he forgot logic, revenge and everything else. Till all he could think of was that if I married you, he couldn't. There wasn't a doubt left in my mind but what he'd break out, take the gun I'd left for him, and try to kill me before I got to town."

"But the sheriff," said Sally. "You can't go to him with a story like that. He'd call it murder." She seized his hand.

And Larry felt his blood tingle at her touch. He'd aroused that light in her eyes, had he? She was worrying over what was going to happen to him?

He smiled at her. "I've figgered out that angle, too," he told her. And indeed he had.

An hour or so later, Larry showed Sheriff Thayer the note which had originally brought him to Fort Verde. And he told Thayer the story of the five men who had held up his father, twenty years before.

"Now, of course," Larry said, "Ben Wilson's dead. So, naturally we'll prob'ly never know whether he was Donaldson or not. For sure, I mean. But on the other hand, the facts sort of dovetail, don't they? He jumps out of ambush to attack me. Maybe he's got wind of my bein' here lookin' for

him. And maybe he tried to git me, first."

Sheriff Thayer frowned. He had been studying the note which Larry had handed him. And now, he said suddenly, "But man alive, this here note's in Ben's own handwritin'. If he was Donaldson like you're tryin' to make me believe, why on earth would he. . . ." And then Sheriff Thayer broke off. And although Larry could never swear to it afterward, it seemed to him for a second that the sheriff winked at him.

"Come to think of it," said Thayer, "of course Donaldson wrote that note. It was addressed to your brother Tom, you say. And your brother had killed four of Donaldson's pals. Well, Donaldson wanted his revenge on your brother—see? And so the note was a come-on—it was bait to lure him here."

Larry had gone pale a second before, but his color came back to him now.

"Of course," he agreed with Thayer. "And—and when Donaldson found out I wasn't Tom, that didn't change his plans at all, did it?"

"Hardly," said Thayer, "after the lickin' you gave him the other day."

Then Thayer held out one hand to Larry and the other to Sally. "Well, kids," he said, "here's luck."

TWO days later, Joe Anderson, back at the Bar B Ranch received the following letter:

> Dear Joe:
> Well, I've carved the fifth notch in Dad's old gun. And now I've gone out and buried it. Contrary to what I told you when I left, though, I won't be back. Not for a while, anyway. You see I've found a nice old gent near Fort Verde who's pretty well laid up with rheumatism. And I'm going to manage his spread for him.
>
> Larry.

Joe Anderson spat lustily at a convenient knothole. "Nice old gent, my eyebrow," he said.

INTERESTING COW COUNTRY

DOWN on the southwest side of Texas the Rio Grande makes a big turn northeastward, then eastward and south again. This is known as The Big Bend. On the Texas side, west, northwest and north of the great curve of the river, lies one great empire of cattle range that the plow will never threaten. It is high, dry country, made up of hills and plateaus, too arid for farming, yet wet enough for a fine growth of grama grass.

Marfa and Alpine are the two best known towns of the area, and Herefords (whitefaces) are the principal product. Thousands and thousands of them are raised there every year.

Probably the first white man ever to visit this cattle paradise was the Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca who wandered up through there from being shipwrecked on the Texas coast, about 1528, or nearly a hundred years before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. With him there were two Spaniards and a negro.

In 1561, Fray Rodriguez came through; in 1582 Antonio de Espejo; in 1683 Juan de Mendoza. Each of these old Spanish explorers gave glowing accounts of the grazing possibilities of the Big Bend. At that time the Indian tribes living there were the Jumanos and Salineros. By the time American pioneers began to drift in the Comanches and Apaches had it.

The Apaches had their little ranchos even then, and from 1750 on the Spaniards did quite a bit of colonizing. Probably the first American to view this rich grass country was a Dr. Connally who came through with a wagon train, seeking a shorter route from St. Louis to El Paso in 1840. In 1849 many of the Forty-niners en route to the California gold fields passed through, and some of them came back later to establish cattle ranches.

The real beginning of the cattle business here arose when Uncle Sam established a number of frontier forts: chief among them Ft. Davis. The garrisons of soldiers had to have beef, and daring pioneer cattlemen braved the dangers of Indian raids to come in and raise it. John Davis, Milton Favor and Manuel Musquiz were the first.

The first cattle were secured from the great ranches in Mexico, and so were of the longhorn type. Not until about 1880 were the heavier shorthorns brought in, and today these have been almost entirely replaced by the thrifty Herefords, first introduced by the McCutcheon brothers, all the way from Missouri.

To-day there are dozens of huge ranches in the Big Bend country. And if anybody tells you that cow country is soon to be a thing of the past, send him down for a look at them. They will be there twenty-five, fifty, yes a hundred and two hundred years from now. The Big Bend rangeland is one that the plow does not threaten.

Romance Astray

By John Phillip Wayne

Sally was the sort of girl who had the world at her feet. And Bud met her in the land of romance where all the days and nights were just a gorgeous stage for lovers' dreams. Was this good-looking cowboy just like all the others, that other girl wondered as she watched him look at Sally; or would his rangeland wisdom rule his heart?

BUD SERVICE grunted like a pig. Energetically he slapped the black store trousers covering his lean thighs. Without pausing he gave vent to a series of hen-like cackles.

The dark-skinned, white-clad Mexican waiter looked at him, his glance filled with a wonder not untinged with pity. The peculiar antics of this stranger Americano had induced an amazement that was steadily increasing.

Bud was exasperated. His lank, cat-muscled body fairly bristled. This was the fourth restaurant he had visited in Chihua, Mexico, that morning. He had no intention of leaving this one until he got what he wanted. For he had reached the temperature at which water boils and good nature is in revolt.

"Gosh-a'mighty!" he exploded. "Can't yuh understand? I'm askin' in plain English for ham and eggs—" Then pleadingly, "Yuh savvy?"

The waiter shook his head. On his dark face was an expression of bovine patience.

"Yuh savvy pig?" Bud implored. "Pig. Uh—uh—uh—" He grunted to demonstrate. "You know—pig. Make-um squeal—ee—ee—ee—"

The life-like imitation terminated abruptly at his sudden awareness of a throaty chuckle. The chuckle started low and rose in a crescendo of musical laughter. It echoed against the *fonda's* pink and yellow adobe walls and

brought responsive smiles to the gay red and black-seraped Mexican breakfasters, who temporarily forgot their absorption in tortillas and frijoles.

At his side stood a girl. As his sheepish gaze met her twinkling hazel eyes, she smiled, and he felt himself color like a schoolboy caught playing hooky. She was the prettiest creature his cowboy vision had so far encountered.

He sprang to his feet, flustered; stared at her dumbly.

"Ham an' eggs, ain't it, cowboy?" she asked, the remains of a chuckle lingering in a contralto voice low and deep and throbbing with whimsicality.

Bereft of speech, he nodded mutely.

"El señor desea jamón y huevos," she told the waiter.

"Sí señorita—gracias—gracias—"

Bowing and smiling, the man hurried away. Bud found his voice.

"Gosh!" he said, incredulous and wide-eyed. "Are yuh real?"

She smiled. His heart did acrobatics.

"What do you think?"

Seating herself, she removed a close-fitting black straw hat from a mass of copper curls beneath. Her cool glance swept his lean, sun-bronzed face and approved the twinkle lines at the eye-corners and the firmer ones around his lips. Bud's smile became an audacious grin.

"I thought yuh was a angel," he told her mischievously. "Yuh sure come along right when a angel would've been most welcome."

He paused to regard admiringly her slim figure gowned in becoming summer print.

"Yuh're American, ain't yuh?"

"Texan," she said, after a pause during which she searched his face appraisingly. *"Tejana,* they say down here. I'm Mona Scanlon. We're from Rio."

"Shore 'nuff?" he exclaimed delightedly. "I'm a longhorn myself—name o' Bud Service. I sort o' wandered down 'crost the Rio Grande, an' I shore been wishin' it hadn't been necessary, ever since." He paused and shot her an approving glance. "Up tuh now, I mean," he amended hastily.

She cleared a space for his ham and eggs, brought by the now beaming waiter; smiled appreciation at his invitation to order for herself, but moved her head in negation.

"We didn't exactly drift down," she said. "We're here to see the bullfights. Oh, I don't like 'em myself," she denied, at Bud's swift scrutiny. "But my sister Sally thinks they're great. She persuaded Dad to stay until to-morrow. There's goin' to be a special fight—bull imported for the occasion. Sally wants to see Juan Alvarez, the matador, in the arena again. She an' Dad are goin' to join me here; that's how I happened to come in."

"Which shore was lucky—for me," said Bud, attacking his ham and eggs. Then, seriously, he said, "Course, 'tain't none o' my business, but I ain't exactly fond o' bullfighters myself. They've always struck me as bein' kind of stuck up over nothin'. The women folks, though, seem tuh be strong for them."

A momentary line of worry etched itself on Mona's forehead. Then she shook her head and her face cleared. Plainly this was a subject she did not care to discuss.

"Try tellin' Sally that," she challenged, smiling. "Course, there's nothin' serious between her an' Señor Alvarez. Sis is just attractive and, well, men have taught her to expect their admiration. Anyway we'll be goin' back to Texas day after to-morrow. I sure won't be sorry to be home again."

"Mexico's all right—for Mexicans," Bud agreed absently, noticing the copper sheen of her hair and the way it curled in tendrils over pink ears. "Me, I wouldn't swap one inch o' Texas bunch grass for the whole country. The trouble with Mexico is there's too many Mexicans in it. A place where yuh can't even get ham an' eggs—"

He broke off on an aggrieved note. His gaze followed hers to the adobe

doorway, which framed a bit of blue sky, Chihua's dirty central square and five native porters, taking their midday siestas under a giant cocoanut palm. This vista presented itself as the background of two advancing figures: a man and a girl.

The man was Western and range-bred, about fifty or fifty-five, gray-haired under a ten-gallon white Stetson. Broad-shouldered he was, in his black, Sunday broadcloth suit, with sun-tanned, wrinkled face made vivid and arrestingly alive by constantly narrowed, far-seeing eyes. Tom Scanlon was a man who had looked across distances all his life, who knew cows and great rolling stretches of rangeland. He knew horses, too—his legs were bowed from sitting a saddle.

The girl was tall and dark. Her glistening black hair was brushed straight away on either side of her smoothly tanned forehead under a wide-brimmed, green straw picture hat. The imperious grace of a princess was in her swinging walk, and she carried her head like a high-spirited horse. Dark, flashing eyes complemented her hair. She was a vision in green. With her coming, the titian beauty of the girl seated opposite Bud Service was overshadowed.

Seeing Mona, the girl smiled. For the moment Bud forgot everything else but that smile.

Aware of his intent regard, and realizing that Sally had added another man to her list of quick conquests, Mona's eyes clouded. She had been interested in the lank, good-looking Texan; but as was usual with most men, first sight of Sally had made him forget her presence. From childhood things had been like that between Sally and herself. Thus destiny had so far allowed Mona no more than the momentary attention of any man.

"There's Dad an' sister," she said.

Starting from the trance induced by Sally's approaching loveliness, Bud sprang to his feet as they entered the room.

"Howdy, Mistuh Service—"

Tom Scanlon's keen eyes beamed. His voice as he acknowledged the introduction was hearty, booming. A swift, appraising glance had passed between the two men, and each had found in the other some quality that made for instant friendship; as though each was immediately aware of the other's potentialities. They remained standing for the moment. Scanlon continued:

"It's mighty good tuh meet up with a Texan. Even though we're just across the Border, there ain't many Americans come over here. I see yuh've met Mona. This here's my other li'l' girl, Sally—the real boss of the home ranch. Cowhands step high, wide and handsome when she's around. Kind o' bosses me a li'l' bit, too. We all are down here tuh see the bullfightin', though I ain't sayin' I'm fond of it myself."

Sally turned her dark eyes on Bud and smiled appealingly. He was succumbing rapidly to her charm, and he found it an agreeable sensation. He could not know that she was accustomed to overwhelming men; nor that her charm had the same practised spontaneity as her smile.

"Dad an' sis think I'm awful 'cause I like Mexico, an' the matadors," she confided in a voice that was a liquid, heart-shattering refrain. "I just know you'll agree with me; won't you, Mister Service? Isn't it marvelous how they go into the arena armed only with scarlet cloaks? If they'd just allow fights in the States. . . ."

"Yes'm," said Bud, dubiously reconsidering his opinion of a place not even civilized enough to afford due recognition to ham and eggs. He retained his prejudices against bullfighting and matadors, however.

"Mexico's all right, I reckon," he continued, "but I can't say I admire the national sport. The way they treat horses—puttin' them in the arena tuh be gored—ain't human, seems tuh me."

"Oh, the horses!" Sally returned dis-

dainfully and a little disappointedly, as though he had failed her when she depended upon his championship. "They're only fit for glue an' hides, anyway. They're just worn-out old nags. Not my idea of real horses at all."

There was a hint of cruelty in her words. Bud regarded her speculatively. Mona leaned forward.

"They're flesh an' blood animals anyway—with feelin's, too," she said heatedly. "I think—"

"Whoa, wait a minute!"

Scanlon averted the threatened argument by changing the subject; did it dexterously, as though from long practice. He eyed Bud appraisingly.

"What brought you 'crost the Rio Grande, Mistuh Service? Yuh shore didn't come down to see no matadors. Course,"—hastily—"'tain't none o' my business. I ain't wantin' tuh butt in. But seein' yuh're home folks I'm kind o' curious."

Bud grinned appreciation.

"That's all right." His voice lowered. "Yuh see, speakin' right confidential, I'm a deputy. Drifted down thisaway after a hombre that's wanted mighty bad for murder. He was s'posed tuh head for Chihua."

"H'm-m. Serious business," Scanlon said. "Yuh located yore man yet?"

"Not yet," said Bud, "an' I have tuh play my cards mighty close tuh my chest. Reckon the Mex officials will be okay. I'm figurin' they'll aim tuh keep in right with the United States. It's the town people I have tuh keep an eye on. The fellow I'm after is prob'ly usin' another name from what we know him by in Texas. Likewise, he's more'n likely tuh have plenty o' friends here. If he got wind o' who I am an' what I'm after he'd prob'ly high-tail it; an' I might wake up dead, nursin' a knife 'tween my ribs."

He paused and looked at Sally, whose bored gaze was fixed on the graying yellow of the ceiling.

"Shucks," he muttered apologetically. "I oughter be hamstrung for talkin' business in the presence o' ladies. I shore crave yore pardon."

Mona's cool hazel eyes had never left Bud's face as he talked. For an instant Sally lowered her gaze from the ceiling and gave him a provocatively flirtatious smile. Mona leaned her bronzed head forward and broke the silence.

"I've got an idea." Her voice lowered confidentially. "We're goin' to be here until day after to-morrow, you know. Why don't you join our party? That'd make 'em think you were just another tourist, an' nobody'd suspect you. When we leave, they'll think you just stayed behind for a day or two before comin' to be with us again. You might even be able to locate an' arrest your man before we go."

"Sure now, that is a idea," Scanlon seconded. "We'd be mighty glad tuh have yuh, son."

"Well—" Bud hesitated, trying to catch Sally's eyes. She granted him a nod.

"It is a good idea," she said. "You might come to the Grand Hotel de Paris for supper to-night."

"I'm stayin' there," he said with a grin at the incongruity of the shabby hostelry and its grand name. His sudden decision to accept the situation was influenced by her friendly nod. "It's funny I ain't seen yuh before now. Course, I ain't been eatin' there. Tuh my way o' thinkin' French chuck an' Mex is about as bad as each other. Ham an' eggs is my dish; which same yuh might've gathered from the way I've laid away the plate Miss Mona helped me order before yuh come in. I shore won't miss meetin' yuh to-night."

"Don't," Scanlon said, rising as he spoke. "We'll be seein' yuh."

"Don't forget," Mona smiled, having succeeded in making him look at her for a moment. Her eyes clouded with renewed vexation as his gaze returned to Sally.

"No'm," he assured. "More likely I'd forget my right arm, or my six-gun."

Sally's dark imperious beauty lingered persistently in Bud's mind as he paid his bill and left the restaurant. No girl had ever before demanded so much of his interest upon such short acquaintance, but Sally Scanlon was one in a million.

Mona was a nice girl, too, he allowed, but compared to Sally she was just that and nothing more. Masculine hearts would likely behave with her. She was the kind of a girl a man would make a pal of, at the same moment falling head over heels in love with her sister. On the latter point, he decided, he had better watch himself—so that he would not follow suit.

It was a bit disappointing to reflect how callous Sally had seemed when she spoke of the horses sacrificed in Mexican bull rings. But her attitude was probably due to youth and carelessness, he told himself, defending her.

When he went into Chihua's drowsy, sunlit square a little later he had forgotten all about it. Unaware that his deputy's star protruded slightly from a vest pocket, he was entirely unsuspicious when a sharp-eyed though professedly blind beggar approached, guitar swung under one arm.

"*Señor, una limosna por el amor de Dios,*" the Mexican whined, a suspiciously plump hand extended for the alms he requested.

Bud stopped and looked at him.

"No savvy," he said. Then, his attention drawn to the guitar, he asked, "Say, hombre, can yuh play that thing?"

Surprisingly, the man responded in English.

"*Sí, señor,* I play—the old song of Mexico—of love, romance, the beautiful señorita. . . ."

He struck a chord to prove his ability, and raised his head to sing. Realizing that the amused interest of the group of natives, interrupted in their noonday siestas under the cocoanut palm, was centered upon him, Bud hastened to halt the performance.

"Hold it," he commanded. At a sudden impetuous thought he produced a coin and placed it in the man's hand.

"Yuh savvy Grand Hotel duh Paris?" he demanded. "Well, come over there to-night. If yuh hear me whistlin', it'll mean I got a lady outside an' I want yuh tuh serenade us. I'll just try yuh out on them old Mex songs yuh're braggin' about."

"*Sí, señor. Gracias—gracias.* . . ."

Smirking, the man disclosed a row of uneven, yellowed teeth. With a nod and a word of dismissal Bud wheeled and strode away. As he presented his back, a scowl swept over the beggar's dark face. For an instant his supposedly sightless eyes flashed open and glinted with hatred. He was not likely to forget the Americano, whom he had singled out to follow from the moment of his arrival, and the sight of whose deputy star had clinched his suspicions. He had seen badges like that before; also lean, hard-jawed men like the stranger.

"*Diablo gringo!*" he snarled, low-voiced and tense. "Pedro play for you the serenade of love, but maybe you no hear it, eh?"

THE Grand Hotel de Paris had been built and was owned by a fat Frenchman with a flair for superlatives; it was neither grand nor Parisian. Not content with the native yellows and pinks, he had added French blue to its adobe walls; with the result that the large, square building with its open, tile-paved patio was a distressing nightmare of color, spattered indiscriminately here and there with dissonant flecks of torturing color contrast.

The place had two saving characteristics. A flower-surrounded fountain centered the patio, and at night the moon-shadows made the building a great blur, hiding its paint and casting the ugly iron balconies under each deep window into lacy silhouettes.

Sally thought the entire situation beautiful, and crowded with romance.

Such a moon as hung above the patio now could have been placed there for no other purpose.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" she murmured, pausing to pick a red rose which she thrust into her hair. "Romance fills every spot of this country. I wish sometimes I had been born here in the picturesqueness of it all."

"Yes'm," said Bud. "It's all right, I reckon. But for my part, I'll take Texas. There's more romance there than anywhere else I know of. I allow real romance ain't in no particular country or place. It's like the end o' the rainbow. Yuh wander all yore life believin' heart an' soul that it's bound tuh be aroun' the next corner. Then maybe some day yuh wake up on the prairie or in the bunkhouse at the home ranch an' it's settin' right there alongside o' yuh. It's been inside yoreself all the time, just waitin' for yore eyes tuh open wide enough tuh see it an' recognize it for what it is."

"Oh, I like Texas," she admitted unconvincingly. "Only—nothin' ever happens there. I've seen rodeos, bulldoggin' contests, cowpunchin'. They're all just work. Mexico has the real idea of sport: bullfightin'—where men really show their superiority over beasts. Why can't American cowboys do somethin' real like that?"

Hearing their voices beneath her window as she extinguished the light, Mona looked down. Her lips tautened as she saw Sally wearing the black Spanish dress and lace mantilla she had affected ever since coming to Mexico, in which she was most seductive and alluring. The dress explained her plea for early excuse from the supper table.

Mona was worried. Unintentionally, she had overheard her sister and Señor Juan Alvarez discussing the possibilities of an elopement the night following the bullfight; and she was convinced that Alvarez was a scoundrel. She had said nothing to her father, afraid that the hot-headed rangeman might act first and ask questions afterward if he knew, thereby precipitating himself into trouble with the Mexican authorities. As a precaution against such a contingency his six-gun, which she had surreptitiously removed from his bureau drawer, was at this moment reposing under her mattress.

Sally seemed to like the cowboy with whom she was walking at the moment; but that did not necessarily mean that she would forego her plans with Alvarez. Sally liked all men, provided they were good-looking, interesting, and she could center their interest upon herself. She had been born a flirt, Mona condoned, which wasn't her fault. As for Bud Service—his interest in her dark-haired sister was only too evident.

That she herself was attracted to the Texan made no difference. She would be sporting enough to further the apparently rapidly developing romance, if by so doing she could avert the undesired elopement with the Spaniard. Thereby she'd save her sister from the life of misery that must surely follow. Besides, Bud Service was not even aware of her existence.

She saw the Texan lean toward her sister, with lover-like questioning.

"Would yuh really like cowboys that fought wild bulls with red cloaks?" he asked.

Quietly, Mona closed the two halves of the French window. She did not hear the reply to his question.

"That depends," said Sally. "I don't b'lieve an American cowboy would stand a chance in the arena. It takes skill, you know, an' trainin'. Matadors spend their lives preparin' for those grand moments when the beast lies dead at their feet an' the whole town goes wild applaudin'. I'd give all I have for just one such experience. My friend, Señor Juan Alvarez—"

"Yes'm," said Bud, gently interrupting. "Let's go over in that li'l' nook there for a spell. Yuh mebbe can talk tuh me better settin' down."

He wheeled with her on his arm, and, settling her comfortably, sank be-

side her on the stone bench which was half hidden by the bushes of fragrant wild roses which reared their golden yellow and pink heads behind them. Above and behind the roses towered a single majestic palm. Across the patio a clump of gnarled and time-withered cypress stood sentinel over a narrow lane which led to the street. The moon cast a blue haze over all, and stressed a hidden beauty the sun could not reveal. Bud's eyes feasted on it, and on the dark loveliness of the girl beside him.

"Yuh get a right pretty view of the moon from here, don't yuh?" he said, looking up at the cloud-fleeced sky. "They say this country was meant for love, Sally. . . ."

He hesitated, then forced himself to go on:

"I—uh—I ain't aimin' tuh be disrespectful nor nothin', but—have yuh ever been in love? I mean real shore 'nuff love, like a woman gets for a man only once in her whole life?"

Sally became introspective. As though by merest chance, her dark head brushed close to his. For the moment she forgot her infatuation for Juan Alvarez. There was something in the man at her side that set up a responsive throbbing in her pulses. She was subtly thrilled by his nearness, and hesitated, wondering if she wanted to hear the words she felt sure were trembling on his lips.

"I don't know," she mused, answering his question. Then, as though some perverse imp had commandeered her tongue: "I've always dreamed of the man I could love. He would be tall and strong; above all, brave. . . ."

Breathing quickly, he moved toward her, and his lean, tanned hand reached over and covered hers. She was accustomed to holding hands; she did not draw hers away.

"D'yuh reckon he might be American—a cowhand?" he demanded huskily.

"He would be handsome. And rich enough for us not to have to worry whether water or grazing were plentiful, or whether disease broke out amongst the stock," she went on, heedless of his interruption.

"Oh!" Bud said, and was silent. Quietly his hand returned to his side. Idly he began plucking leaves from the rosebush at the end of the bench.

"Why did you ask that question?" she murmured, leading him on.

"I was just—gosh-a'mighty! Duck!"

His words reached an abrupt termination. Behind them in the trunk of the palm a long knife plunged and quivered. Whizzing past his ear, it had missed him by the fraction of an inch. His eyes narrowed and as he sprang to his feet he reached for his six-gun in its shoulder holster.

"The moon made us clear targets," he said. "Which means that whoever throwed that knife meant for it tuh miss—"

He was once more interrupted. A stealthy rustling sounded in the copse of gnarled cypress beyond the fountain. Gun in hand, he darted across the patio and into the lane that led to the street.

"Reach, yuh devil!" he growled into the dark shadows.

Silence answered him, and a search among the trees yielded no evidence of his assailant. Angrily he thrust the gun under his arm and returned across the patio. Sally was running toward the hotel.

"Wait a minute," he called.

The girl did not answer, but kept straight ahead.

"Scared, I reckon," he muttered disappointedly. His eyes narrowed, then he shrugged his shoulders. "W-e-ll—I don't s'pose I oughta blame her, though she just ain't somehow like the range girls I been used tuh."

As philosophically as was possible for a man at whom a knife had just been thrown and who had seen the girl with whom he had thought himself in love run away from his side at a time of danger, Bud strode to the palm and pulled the knife out.

It had been buried more than an inch. An ugly weapon; from a carved bone handle darkened with age, six inches of razor-edged steel protruded. Holding it in his palm, he noticed that it had been balanced just right for throwing.

"H'mph," he muttered, whistling softly. "Pretty things." He grinned and continued: "A souvenir from Mexico, the land o' romance!"

At a sudden sound he thrust the knife into his pocket, and, his gun again flashing into his hand, wheeled to meet what might be new danger.

Facing him stood the blind beggar, guitar in position ready to play the serenade ordered that morning. The man had approached so noiselessly that for a moment Bud was startled and his trigger-finger poised for some action. Then, the tension broken as he remembered his whistle—the signal agreed upon between himself and the Mexican—he laughed. As the beggar spoke, he returned the weapon to its holster.

"I come, señor," the man said, bowing low over his instrument. "You like for me to play now?"

Suddenly suspicious, Bud frowned and shot the Mexican a glance of swift appraisal. The next moment he told himself that his suspicions were groundless. Blind men, even Mexicans, did not throw knives.

"Yuh're kind o' late, hombre," he said mildly, producing a coin and putting it into the man's hand. "The lady's done gone."

The man turned his face toward the sound of Bud's voice. The moon glistened on his closed eyelids as he bowed thanks for the coin.

"*Gracias, señor. . . .*"

A moment later he was gone, stealing away as silently as he had come. Bud watched him for a moment; then he turned and walked to the front of the hotel. Some overtone in the beggar's voice puzzled him.

He was met with a hail from the semidarkness as he neared the wide, rambling dirt porch, and he saw Tom Scanlon sitting behind the red glow of a brown paper c

"Come on over an' set, Bud," the ranchman invited, pulling up a chair. "I ain't seen yuh since supper."

"Been collectin' souvenirs," Bud grinned, seating himself and handing Scanlon the knife. "The wind that was stirred up when this thing buzzed past my ear durn near gave me pneumonia."

"Throwed at yuh, huh?" Scanlon exclaimed, examining the knife with surprised interest. "Looks like somebody ain't anxious for yuh tuh hang aroun' in Chihua, son."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Bud admitted. "I'm figurin' that tuh be a warnin'. It seems that the skunk-bitten coyote I'm after has found out what I'm here for, which same might mean that he'll clear out an' I'll have tuh go lookin' for him somewheres else."

"I don't know," Scanlon said, returning the knife and making an attempt to dispel the cowboy's gloom; "these here Mexicans are funny critters. Bullfights seem tuh be their main love in life. To-morrow's goin' tuh be a special one. This Alvarez hombre's goin' up against a real bull—for the first time in his life, I'm bettin'. Chances are, yore man ain't goin' tuh miss it. Yuh might more'n likely be able tuh pick him out from amongst the crowd. Course yuh can identify him?"

Bud nodded and felt inside his coat pocket in the dark.

"Yeh. I got a sheriff's dodger showin' three views of his face," he said. "He ain't a bad-lookin' feller; I s'pect he'd make a hit with women folks. This Mex hombre was a cowhand o' sorts; him an' another one. They lit out at the same time, but we couldn't prove that the other one had anything tuh do with the killin'."

"Some of these greasers are good-lookin' devils," Scanlon agreed. "Tell yuh the truth, Sally's had me right worried 'bout this here Alvarez. She's young, yuh know, an' I'm scared she's lettin' him pay her too much attention. Course, she's got a pretty fair head on

her shoulders for a youngster; but I'll be hawgtied if I want her tuh give me a Mex for a son-in-law.

"I've tried tuh talk tuh her. He ain't got such a good reputation nohow. Kinda makes love too easy for it tuh be the genuwine article. But she's always been given her head, an' cons'quently won't listen tuh me now. I'll be powerful glad tuh git her away from down here, I don't mind tellin' yuh. Meanwhile, unless yuh get too busy, to-morrow, I'd shore appreciate yore kind o' helpin' me keep a eye on both my youngsters."

Bud looked at him and grinned.

"I reckon I'd likely be right fond o' that job," he said. "Me, I ain't what yuh'd call a ladies' man exactly, but—"

"Oh!" said Scanlon, giving him a keen glance and a smile. "That's the way it is, huh? Well, Bud, I'm shore wishin' yuh luck. Sally's a mighty fine li'l' girl, an' I'm figurin' you tuh be the right sort o' man."

"Oh, I ain't doin' nothin' but talkin', an' not much o' that just at present," Bud declared hastily.

Tom Scanlon chuckled, and, reaching over, patted his knee.

"'Sall right, son. Mebbe when yuh git ready tuh talk yuh'll be surprised. I reckon the right man might make Sally forget a lot of her foolishness 'bout bullfights an' such things."

Chihua's bull ring was comparatively small. Facing the arena was a tier of boxes, flanked by eight or ten rows of seats, all of which were separated from the ring by a wooden barrier about five feet high. Behind this barrier was a promenade connecting with the aisles. The boxes were separated by a cotton rope, woven with gayly dyed strands, which were passed through brass guide rings and fastened with an ordinary snap device.

As Bud Service turned from his intent survey of the crowd to Tom Scanlon, who sat at his left, his lean, suntanned face was clouded with disappointment. At the ranchman's look of interrogation he shook his head.

"Not yet," he muttered. "There's enough other people here, but the hombre I'm lookin' for ain't amongst 'em."

"There's time yet," said Scanlon philosophically.

From the other side of her father, Mona looked across and smiled. She started to speak; but Sally, in the seat she had maneuvered at Bud's right, leaned close to him and touched his arm. He looked at her inquiringly.

She was beautiful. Brown and gold in the dress and hat she wore contrasted with her dark eyes and black hair and made her compellingly attractive. Unconsciously he was drifting back under the spell she exercised, from which he had all but escaped the night before. Aware of this, Mona bit her lip and stared with unseeing eyes at the sandy stretch of the arena.

Realizing that she had put herself at a disadvantage, Sally had carefully refrained from referring to the events of the preceding night. She sighed now and shook her head reprovingly, her eyes flirtatiously chiding him.

"You aren't payin' any attention to the arena," she reminded smilingly. "Don't you love the costumes of this crowd? It's like goin' back a hundred years into the past. See those wooden gates at the end of the arena? That's where the matador comes in."

His answer was drowned by the blare of the band, which struck up a stirring march. All eyes were directed to the gates Sally had pointed out to him.

Two horsemen with red, yellow and green plumes streaming gayly from their black hats entered the arena. Their mounts had been carefully groomed and beribboned for the occasion. The riders parted, each circling the arena, and met before the boxes containing the town dignitaries and their families. Their hats came off in a sweeping bow, and they announced the program. Then they spurred their horses into spectacular action and impressively made their exit.

"Looks like the beginning of a circus p'rade tuh me," Bud said in an aside to Scanlon.

The ranchman chuckled. "Yeh—" He broke off and winked as Sally's finger rose to her lips.

"Hush!" she cautioned.

Absorbed, she leaned forward, her eyes shining with anticipation. Catching Bud's glance for the moment, Mona smiled ruefully, then turned her bronze head away.

"Now what?" Bud drawled.

Sally frowned. Bud was not giving her the attention she had planned on. He seemed distracted and once or twice she had caught his eyes straying toward Mona, as though something puzzled him and he was seeking an answer to that puzzle. For an instant her lips compressed and she looked at him speculatively. Then she smiled.

"The matador," she said, answering his question. "My friend—Señor Alvarez."

Again the gates swung open. The band increased in tempo and volume, signaling the reappearance of the two velvet-clad, plumed horsemen, followed by the picadors and a gay cavalcade. Their costumes glittered in the light of the sinking sun like cloth embroidered with thousands of varicolored jewels. Then came Juan Alvarez, resplendent in gold braid and velvet. He was handsome in a spectacular way, and the crowd applauded vociferously.

They marched around the ring, Alvarez bowing and smiling gracious acknowledgment to the applauding populace. His parade cloak folded over his arm, the matador crossed the arena to Sally. She awaited him in wide-eyed anticipation.

A few paces away he halted, and, lifting his hat, bowed low. Then with the graceful spreading flight of a bird, the cloak swept across the intervening distance and dropped into the girl's lap.

Juan Alvarez had designated his choice of the most beautiful girl at the arena side. At first silent, the crowd burst into applause as Sally rose to her feet. She stood for a moment, acknowledging the honor, then sank back. The arena was cleared for action.

Scanlon turned to Bud, scowling, his hands clenched.

"These greasers are nervy devils," he growled, low-voiced and tense. "That was Juan Alvarez, o' course. Lord! I wouldn't go through this kind of show again for—"

He broke off, startled by the expression in Bud's eyes.

"What's the matter, son?"

"Nothing," said Bud evasively. Then, grinning, he asked, "What's next on the bill o' fare?"

He had surreptitiously glanced at the sheriff's dodger in his coat pocket. Scanlon had been right. The man he wanted for murder had not missed the bullfight. In spite of the disguise afforded by the traditional matador's wig, when he had lifted his hat, recognition had been instantaneous. Juan Alvarez was his man.

The discovery presented a problem. A popular matador, acclaimed by the natives of Chihua and of the surrounding country, the Mexican would be a hard man to arrest. To avoid trouble, Bud's move would have to be made quietly. The trip across the Border would have to be even more quiet.

Sally Scanlon added another angle. Her acceptance of the matador's attentions was common knowledge. Widespread news of the arrest would almost certainly result in undesirable publicity for the Scanlons; a thing he must avoid if possible. For the present he could do nothing but wait for events to shape themselves, and determine his course of procedure. He leaned forward and watched the arena moodily.

A gate at the opposite end from that at which the procession had entered swung open and a bull came slowly and uncertainly into the ring.

It was a sorry beast, scrawny and

dazed looking. It shambled forward, head lowered and moving from side to side. With a flashing show of iron-tipped spikes, the mounted picadors instantly spurred into action.

Their spikes plunged down. The beast gave an almost human bellowing moan as the cruel barbs entered its flesh, then, goaded into fury, it whirled and blindly charged its tormentors, who dodged to one side and repeated their tantalizing maneuvers.

Sober-eyed, Bud turned to Scanlon.

"This is plumb savage," he grated angrily. "That steer's sick."

Tom Scanlon had the Westerner's natural love for all stock. His gray eyes flashed fire, and the muscles in his massive hands tautened, showing knotted cords through the tanned skin.

"Yuh ain't seen the half of it yet," he muttered. "Wait till the hosses git theirs."

An exclamation at his side drew Bud's attention to Sally. The girl's dark eyes were shining with feverish excitement as she sat forward, drinking in the scene. Her exhibition of heartless enjoyment chilled him. It was as though some wild, primitive strain existed within her and set the throbbing pulses beating in her pale forehead as she witnessed the torturing of a helpless and bewildered animal. As his gaze returned to the arena, where for the amusement of a tense and brutal crowd, pitiless men goaded the bull to a frenzy of terror, he caught Sally's low-voiced laugh, and shuddered.

The picadors withdrew and the ring-monkeys came into the arena, astride mounts whose bony frames bore little resemblance to the range horses Bud had known and loved all his life. As he watched, they spurred in close to the madly thrashing steer.

Sally leaned forward as before, her rapt gaze fixed on the arena. Bud's glance swept past Scanlon to Mona. Her bronze head was bowed, but under the close-fitting black hat he could see that her face was white and drawn. Her handkerchief was pressed to her lips. She seemed near the end of her endurance.

Frenzied applause from the crowd drew his attention to the arena again. With his scarlet cloak swinging over his arm, Juan Alvarez entered and strode toward the pain-maddened animal.

The bull charged. There came a flash of scarlet as the cloak swung out, and a yell of triumph from the crowd as Alvarez gracefully sidestepped, and the beast rushed by.

The maneuver was repeated, accompanied by the vociferous plaudits of the crowd. Then, as the bull began to visibly weaken, there was a quick flash of steel and it fell, mortally wounded. Hat in hand, Alvarez acknowledged the tumult of applause his feat had produced.

Sally's eyes shone in admiration of the kill and she turned wordlessly to Bud. But he avoided meeting her triumphant glance.

With the same procedure, another scrawny bull was despatched, the crowd becoming more uproarious and filled with blood lust. Alvarez visibly swelled with importance and pleasure. Plainly, there was but one really meritorious personage in the matador's universe—himself.

The Mexican's eyes sought Sally's after each spectacular play, and Bud realized what it was that had brought the man to the arena in the face of a greater danger than the bulls—that of arrest. To win the adulation of the crowd was the essence of life to him, and Alvarez dared public performance, though he knew a price was upon his head. Bud respected his nerve, which the matador flaunted as gayly as his scarlet cloak. Undoubtedly, Juan Alvarez was not a coward.

"We'll see some fun now," said Scanlon, rustling his program and breaking the silence which had settled over their party. "I ain't good at readin' this lingo, but I can make out that the real fight'll be next. I reckon this'll

be the first real bull Alvarez ever went up against."

"The others shore wouldn't make good beef," Bud said. "It's a wonder they didn't die of old age before those hombres could get 'em in the ring."

Scanlon chuckled; then his eyes turned toward the gate of the cattle chute, and he gripped Bud's arm.

"Look at that!" he marveled. "Here he comes. A real beauty!"

A Burma steer dashed out of the chute, bawling and stopping to paw the ground. He was a great black brute, well fed and mad with excitement.

The picadors galloped in, lances ready. The steer turned on them; drove them back. It plunged head on and careened into the wooden barricade. The grand stand quivered from the impact. The crowd was silent, tense. They held their breaths as they waited.

A picador came racing in again. The steer turned and charged the horse. Cruel horns ripped into its side. The black screamed and fell. Then the Burma charged the picador, who had leaped clear of the saddle. Cursing with fear, the Mexican dodged the dagger points of the evil horns, darted for the barrier and scrambled over it to safety.

The other picador came up. The steer charged him and chased him the length of the arena and back again. Then he waited, massive head lowered, bloodshot eyes gleaming crazily, his hoof pawing and scattering sand around in whirling clouds.

Amid wild excitement the banderillas were fixed.

"Man!" Bud exclaimed to Scanlon in wide-eyed admiration, emitting a deep-drawn breath. "That longhorn's prod-dy, sure enough."

"Man-killer, or wants tuh be," Scanlon agreed. "Wonder how Alvarez is goin' tuh handle this one?"

As though in answer, the Mexican stepped into the arena, scarlet cloak in its usual jaunty position over his arm. Bud caught a startled look in the man's eyes, and for a moment he seemed to nerve himself for the coming encounter. This looked like a bad situation. If Alvarez was afraid, nothing could keep that fact from the uncannily keen senses of the bull. Hell seemed about to cut loose.

Bud watched beast and man closely. Texas authorities had ordered him to bring the murderer back alive, and it would not do to let the steer kill Alvarez.

Thundering down the arena the black Burma came, banderillas streaming. It was mad for fight, crazy for killing. Its long horns tossed like wicked curved scimitars. Legs spraddled, he stopped as he caught sight of the lone man in the center of the arena. Alvarez waited, his scarlet cloak ready. His teeth were bared in a set grin.

The steer bellowed, pawed, then, head down, it lunged forward. There was the cutting cry of a woman lashed with terror. Mona hid her face in her hands. Following, there came a stillness as of death.

Straight toward the proud, flamboyant figure the bull sped; maddened and bellowing a challenge to the flashing folds of scarlet. The cloak swung expertly, and with the litheness of a cat Alvarez sidestepped and was again in position to meet the surprised bull's quick wheel and return.

Three times he eluded the enraged animal. At the fourth charge the red cape was caught by the Burma's horns. It split with a sharp, rasping sound and was jerked from Alvarez' hand. As the bull whirled for another attack a trailing end of the cape whipped around the matador's ankles and tripped him. He was down!

The steer leaped whirling, the scarlet cloak, on its horns like a triumphal banner, streaming over its shoulders. It dived back and pivoted, intent only upon the death of the hated man-enemy in its path.

There came sobbing, terrified screams

from the women in the stands. Before Alvarez could regain his feet, the scimitar horns raised him and sent him spinning across the arena, where he lay, inert. The beast wheeled to charge again.

There was one thought uppermost in Bud Service's mind. His orders were to bring his man back to Texas alive. A flying, coatless figure, he vaulted the barrier and was in the arena. A gasp went up from the grand stand as the steer saw him. The beast hesitated in his mad gallop toward the matador, and whirled to charge the new enemy.

"Yee-ow!"

Bud's yell rang out startlingly in the hush of the arena. Surprised at the familiar noise, the bull slid to a halt. His sharp hoofs plowed up the dirt.

Bud advanced, still yelling. For an instant the crowd was breathlessly silent. Then a mighty roar shattered the stillness and they sprang to their feet, tossing their hats wildly in the air. The rangy Texan had gripped the steer's head and was bulldogging the man-killing animal!

It was a mad tussle. Under him, Bud felt the living devil of the beast he fought. The muscles on his arms stood out in cords, bulging through his ripped shirt as he tugged. When his limit of endurance was about reached and breath was fire in his tortured lungs, the steer fell, its head twisted sharply to the left and flat on the ground, its legs pawing the air helplessly as fear succeeded killer passion.

He was down; but Bud had no rope. He could not hold this position long. Unless help came, there could be only one end. Picadors and arena-monkeys alike were too terrified to aid him. Alvarez had dragged himself to his feet by the barrier, apparently unhurt, but dazed and shaken.

Then a miracle happened. The much needed rope was thrust into Bud's hands. Realizing his danger, Mona had started to her feet. Before her father sensed her purpose, the girl had grasped the dyed cotton rope that partitioned off their box. One frantic jerk and it was free. Her youthful figure flashed down among the madly jostling, roaring crowd. In another moment she had climbed the barrier and darted to Bud's side.

For an instant as she thrust the rope over his hand, their eyes met; then Tom Scanlon was in the ring and had carried his daughter back to safety.

Struggling frantically, the steer tried to regain its feet, but with a supreme effort Bud held it down, and finished his job by hogtying it. Dazedly, he rose. In his ears rang the thunder of applause. Eager and admiring attendants surrounded him, but he brushed them aside and wearily made his way to Alvarez. Though his eyes carried the look of a beaten animal, the Mexican stood proudly erect.

"I want you—" Bud gasped. "I'm—deputy— That killin'—"

Unflinching, Alvarez looked into his eyes.

"I know, señor," he said quietly. "You are a brave man. You saved my life. I will come without trouble. I knew you were here. I should not have come to the arena. But my people expected me. Juan Alvarez could not fail them, señor. I gambled on my chance to get away."

Bud met his eyes, gravely paying tribute to the man's unquestionable courage.

"Yuh're brave yoreself," he said. "But yuh're foolish, Rafael Garcia."

Alvarez bowed mockingly.

"Señor, you honor me. I do not promise that I will not try to escape. If necessary, I might even be tempted to kill you. Life is dear. . . ."

A glance passed between the two men. Enemies though they were, by virtue of their respective positions, that glance held mutual respect. They had found one piece of common ground, these two. Bud grinned.

"I reckon I'll have tuh chance that," he said. "Yuh ready tuh go?"

Quietly and without answering, the

Mexican fell in beside him. As they walked down the arena toward the gateway to the street the crowd rose to its feet and hissed jibing curses at the matador, their fallen idol, and proclaiming Bud their hero in no uncertain terms. Alvarez' mouth drew into a straight line. He turned to Bud with a bitter smile.

"That is the span of glory, señor," he said, shrugging. "This morning I was their god. Now that the mad bull has been dragged away, they can forget that he was ten thousand devils in strength and can see only that Juan Alvarez has failed. History has been made of such things—"

He broke off short and drew himself proudly erect.

"You will permit a cigarette, señor?" he asked, as though no other thought occupied his mind. Wordlessly, Bud passed him the makings.

Sally met them at the arena gate and handed Alvarez his bright parade cloak with a gesture of disdain. She smiled and swung forward to give her hand to Bud.

"You were marvelous," she said. "I've been wrong, Bud, about cowboys. I guess I've changed—my heroes."

She flushed and lowered her eyes, the color ebbing and receding in her smooth cheeks. Bud dropped her hand and glanced at Alvarez, whose eyes flashed with a jealousy he tried to conceal.

"Where's Mona?" the Texan demanded abruptly.

Sally looked at him in surprise; then said airily: "She was nervous and excited after her silly exhibition. You would have won out anyway—she was much too impetuous, rushing into the arena like that. Dad put her in a carriage. They're waiting to take you and me back to the hotel."

"She saved my life," said Bud quietly, without glancing at the girl.

Sally disregarded the Mexican, but eyed Bud curiously, as though disdainfully wondering at his suddenly acquired interest in her sister. It was hard for her to realize that a man could be attracted to any girl other than herself.

"You're coming, aren't you?" she continued softly. "I've got so much I want to tell you."

"Señor Alvarez and I have some business to attend to," he said shortly. "I'll be seein' yuh at the hotel tonight."

He motioned to Alvarez to accompany him, and turned away without another word.

"There's goin' to be a dance," Sally called after him. "Maybe we can have a chance to see the moon again—"

Bud turned and looked at her steadily. Her eyes were inviting.

"Maybe . . ." he said.

At the Grand Hotel de Paris a dance was in progress. The soft notes of beautiful *La Paloma* floated through the room from the muted strings of guitars and mandolins. The floor swayed with the gliding movements of the gayly costumed dancers, whose hearts throbbed in response to romantic strains and rose-shaded lights.

The music ended, whispering echoes lingering in the room as breathless, dark-eyed señoritas drew a little apart from the crowd with their caballeros. The first dance, the first hour of romance, had begun. Happily chattering Spanish voices broke the almost hypnotic silence following the caressing breath of music.

Tom Scanlon stood in a corner of the veranda and watched the unhurried approach of Bud Service.

A sudden intimacy had grown between these two, born of a thousand common experiences of the rangeland they both knew and loved—a friendship destined never to be shattered. It seemed to the older man that he had known the younger for a greater span of years even than life. Men in general found it difficult to penetrate the protective wall of natural reserve in Tom Scanlon.

Bud had found it so easy that he was unaware of the existence of such

reserve. Perhaps because he wanted it so, Scanlon fully believed that the tall young Texan loved his daughter, Sally. The union would make him very happy; for Sally was like an unbroken, half-wild colt. He was putty in her hands, and, realizing that he could not control her, he had worried.

Bud halted. Though his lips smiled in greeting, his eyes held a look of concern. He glanced through the dancing crowd as though seeking someone, then turned away disappointedly.

"Looks like everybody's havin' a good time," he commented. "Mona in there? I don't see her. Wanted tuh thank her for what she did to-day."

Tom Scanlon shifted his feet and frowned.

"She wouldn't come down. Said she was tired an' kind o' shaky—which o' course wouldn't be no more'n natural. But I'm kind o' thinkin' there's somethin' else wrong, though she says there ain't. She was in a daze when I took her out of the arena this afternoon—"

He broke off, his eyes turning to an approaching figure.

"Here comes Sally," he continued. "She's left the greaser she was with. I s'pect she might want yuh tuh dance.'"

"Which ain't in my line a-tall," said Bud.

Under the rose lights the imperious beauty of the girl showed to even greater advantage than before. She wore the long, black Spanish gown. A lace mantilla hugged her trim shoulders and fell in caressing folds about her arms. Thrust into her black hair was a jeweled Spanish comb. Beside it nestled the silky petals of a flaming rose.

She had forgotten Juan Alvarez, so negligible had been her infatuation for the Mexican. To-night she meant Bud Service to say the words she thought had been on his tongue that other moonlit night and from which she had fled. She was captivating, triumphant, as she walked toward him.

Smiling invitation as the muted strings of the orchestra sounded the first note of the new dance, she held out her hand to claim him.

"Ours—" she commanded, graciously, as a princess might confer a priceless gift upon a favorite suitor.

Wordlessly they whirled amongst the other dancers, pivoting, gliding with superb grace, attuned to the throbbing pulse beat of guitars. Her dark eyes sought his and she smiled.

"Is there anything you can't do?" she asked, complimenting his dancing. "I'm proud of you—proud that you come from my country. People are pointing you out as we pass. They regard you as a hero."

"I thought yuh didn't have much use for cowhands," he countered.

She frowned. He was proving unruly; she must manage him better. Her lips drew into a pout.

"I didn't say that." She sounded hurt. "People are pointing at me, too. They know Juan Alvarez has paid me attentions—that you've arrested him for murder. I reckon I was a little fool, but I'm trying to forget it."

"Time cures a lot of things," Bud remarked. "An' Alvarez is in jail. He seems tuh take hard luck mighty calmly."

"You don't know him," she cautioned. "Please be careful when you're takin' him back—won't you?"

She paused, studying his face, and smiled up at him.

"Let's go outside," she said. "I'm tired of dancing, and there's a moon. I see Dad's left already. Guess he's gone to bed."

Laughingly, she halted and thrust her arm under his, leading him to the door. The orchestra ceased. There was a patter of applause from the dancers as they went outside.

Bud seated himself on the stone bench beside her. From the fountain in the center of the patio the water rose in a hazy mist, tumbling back blue and green, and sparkling in the moonlight. Behind them was the majestic

palm, carrying a scar where the knife had plunged on that other occasion. Fronting it were the roses, dewy and fragrant. Ahead and beyond the fountain showed the darkness of the cypress, guarding the lane that wound its hidden way to the street.

"Well," said Bud, looking around and at Sally uncomfortably, "it hasn't changed any, has it?"

"But you have," she murmured, exerting every feminine charm to break down his reserve. "You're different somehow, Bud. Tell me, is anything worrying you?"

He stared ahead into the chameleon-like mist of water above the fountain, a far-away look in his eyes. Then he smiled and shook his head.

"I been thinkin' of a lot of things," he said, answering her. "Mostly foolish notions, I guess. Yuh see, I'm a locoed cowpuncher—moon-drunk, yuh might say. I've found myself in love, tuh tell yuh the truth, an' I don't know what tuh do about it. I'm right certain the girl don't care nothin' for me. . . ."

"Why don't you try tellin' her about it, Bud?" she breathed, leaning close to him. "Perhaps she'd like to hear."

From the rose thicket behind them came a carefully modulated masculine voice. Bud leaped to his feet. His hand hesitated in its dive toward the six-gun under his left arm.

Juan Alvarez walked into the moonlight. The gun in his hand was leveled at Bud's heart. The eyes in his dark, smiling face were as hard as dagger points.

"Señor—" he greeted, holding Bud's gaze.

"Howdy," said Bud coolly. "I see yuh got out. I was afraid that jail wouldn't hold yuh."

"Pedro came to my aid," the Mexican smiled. "Allow me. . . ."

He motioned to the shadows of the rose thicket. A man came out. He was dressed in the clothes of a caballero. His eyes were open. He had no guitar. Bud's glance surveyed him understandingly. It was the blind beggar.

"Pedro Garcia," said Alvarez. "It was he who first told me you were here. He is foreman of my ranch in the mountains. You have his knife, I believe. . . ."

"I'm keepin' it—for a souvenir," Bud drawled.

Alvarez bowed.

"As you will. You may trade your revolver for it. Please do not attempt to use the gun. You saved my life. I would not like to kill you."

Bud eyed him steadily for a moment. His orders were to bring the man back to Texas alive. There was still a chance. Wordlessly, he handed over the gun. Alvarez passed it to his confederate. He looked at Sally.

"You seem to have forgotten our engagement, señorita," he said. "Tonight you were to ride with me. We must go quickly, while Pedro guards Señor Service. Horses are waiting. . . ."

Her dark eyes flashed angry fire. She drew herself erect.

"I haven't forgotten," she said scornfully. "I wouldn't go away with a coward, Señor Alvarez. Take your friend and horses and leave, or I'll call for help."

Alvarez laughed nastily, angered by her words.

"Keep him covered, Pedro," he commanded. "If he moves or if she calls—shoot." He paused. "*Querida*," he said to Sally, moving towards her, "always has Juan Alvarez taken what he wanted. It pleases me to have you. . . ."

She raked him with scathing eyes. Then so quickly did Bud move, that Pedro Garcia had no opportunity to fire. Hurtling low in a ground tackle, the Texan's body clove the air. Outstretched arms encircled Alvarez' legs in an unbreakable clasp, and the weight of the tall body behind that steel-muscled grip threw him forward and to the ground.

Afraid to fire now for fear of injuring his master, Pedro instantly covered the girl, threatening her to silence.

Writhing, twisting, angrily thrash-

ing, the two figures on the ground strained every muscle in the mad struggle, while crazily distorted shadows played about them. Wrenching an arm free, Alvarez dived into the wide, soft-leather belt above his hips. When his hand came up, the moonbeams discovered an ominously shining knife.

It flashed up and began a descending plunge. Bud cursed, primitive now in his rage. His hand shot out. The knife stopped in its descent. Alvarez struggled. His hand broke away from the restraining grip.

With herculean effort, Bud disentangled himself and leaped away. Alvarez lunged. Sally gave a choked scream. As Bud circled away, striving to find an opening beneath the upraised, slowly approaching dagger, Pedro Garcia leveled his gun and aimed at the Texan's lank form. But no one had heard light pattering footsteps on the tile-paved floor of the patio.

Almost simultaneously two sounds like the sharp cracking of a blacksnake whip sent scurrying echoes resounding against the adobe wall of the hotel. Instantly followed a howl of pain from Pedro, who stood with his arm hanging limply at his side. His revolver thudded to the tiles from fingers incapable of holding it. Blood from the wound in his arm dripped down and stained his hand.

Startled by the two closely spaced shots, Alvarez had instinctively leaped backward. Bud sprang after him. Wrenched loose, the knife clattered away. Instantly the Texan threw himself into the fight again. Struggling, Alvarez fell, pinned down.

Mona moved to Sally's side, keeping the wounded Pedro covered with her father's six-gun. From her window she had seen the glint of Alvarez' knife. Hastily she had found the gun under her mattress. Taking in the situation as she ran out, she had fired, deflecting Pedro's aim and saving Bud's life.

"Run, Sally—for help!" she gasped, holding her aim.

Fear lent wings to Sally's feet. She returned from the hotel with the chief of Chihua's police and two other men she had found with him, smoking cigarettes on the hotel porch. Curiously the men gazed upon the tableau presented to them in the flower-perfumed, moonlit court—the panting figures on the ground, the bronze-haired girl holding a wounded ruffian at the point of a cattleman's six-gun. . . .

The two men rose to their feet, and Alvarez and Pedro Garcia were put in charge of the police who accompanied the chief. Breathing in great gasps as though starved for air, and groggy with exhaustion, Bud turned to the chief, to whom he had delivered Alvarez that afternoon.

"Better put 'em in my room under guard, señor," he said. Then, grinning, "Alvarez seems tuh be a little too active for that jail of yores."

Bowing, the Mexican acknowledged the request. Then their sullen prisoners were marched away. Starry-eyed and beautiful in the pale glow of the moonlight, Sally came to Bud.

"You've saved my life—and reputation," she said, her voice thrilled with excitement. "I told you I had been a fool. I thought for a while that I loved Juan Alvarez. I knew I was wrong that night when we first talked out there. Women have the privilege of changing their minds. I changed mine that night. . . ."

She paused, seeking his eyes wistfully. Very gently he took her hand.

Seeing his movement, and misunderstanding it, Mona walked apart from them. Her heart was an aching weight, throbbing with a misery that threatened to rise to her throat and choke her with stifled tears

"Yuh give me credit I don't deserve," Bud told Sally softly. "Yuh know, folks claim that mind changin' is strictly a woman's privilege; but I got a idea that it's a man's, too.

"Before all this rumpus started tonight, I was tellin' yuh I was in love with a girl. She's the sweetest thing I

ever found on this earth—an' brave, like a ranch girl ought to be. I've had my eyes opened for romance for a long time. It kept strayin' away, but I followed. Yuh gave me some good advice awhile ago—askin' me why I didn't talk to the girl about my love. I'm goin' tuh take that advice now—if yuh'll excuse me."

His voice trailed off, and as he dropped her hand his gray eyes looked kindly but steadily into the dark depths of hers. For a moment she stared at him, incredulous, unwilling to accept the meaning of his words.

"Oh," she said then in a low, strained voice. Without another word she turned away.

The imperious grace of a princess was in her swinging walk, and she carried her head proudly erect like a high-spirited horse. Her eyes looked straight ahead, searching the way to the looming bulk of the adobe hotel. Kindly night shielded their misery. She had played at romance too long. When it really came, those eyes had been closed. She had failed to recognize it.

By the ever changing colored spray of the fountain the Texan found the girl he loved. Her bronze hair glimmered in the moonlight like soft waves of molten metal. Their eyes crossed the intervening distance. Swiftly Bud reached her side.

No words were said; but words were not needed. Hungrily his arms enfolded her and his lips met the pulsing softness of hers. . . .

Seeming eons later, she stirred, and misty hazel eyes sought to read the love in his face. Contented, she snuggled down again and her fingers lightly brushed the curls in his black hair.

"It's funny about a woman's privilege," she mused with a throaty chuckle of remembrance. "I seem to be about the only one who didn't take advantage of it. But then," she looked up, shyly, "I didn't have any opportunity to change my mind. I reckon I loved you from the time you tried to order ham and eggs. . . ."

Horse Ranch Honeymoon

By Clee Woods

She had courage and a heart undaunted by peril and disaster, this girl of the West. And though her daring spirit took her far from the haunts of men to track down threatening renegades, yet at the end of the quest she found safety in the arms of love.

COWBOYS whooped and yelled, waving their long arms or beating their hands on their leather chaps. One took a chance on running in between Dandy and the other milling horses. The other cowboys shunted the main body of untamed horses off into a side corral.

"All right, you lousy waddies," bellowed Sherd Mortimer. "Here's one hundred dollars that says not a man here can ride that bay brute!"

Mortimer waved a roll of bills. He was a large man and handsome, except that his full face was a little too red and his gray eyes sometimes showed a bit too white. And there was arrogance in his whole bearing.

The young gelding walked on toward the far side of the corral, while Mortimer got no takers for his bet. Dandy was a magnificent creature, untamed, never saddled.

His crest was arched high and proud. His sensitive nostrils were dilating as though he foresaw a battle before he got back to the range that ran unfenced over mesa and mountain. He disdained to run or dodge, but planted one small hoof firmly after the other on his march across the corral.

"Come on, no takers?" Mortimer taunted. "I'd ride him myself, only my sprained ankle ain't well enough for me to buck hook him."

The cowboys atop the fence hated to take that dare. It was the end of the round-up. All longed for a little fun, especially since the crop of salable horses gathered had been so small that

their spirits had been dampened. Several of the more daring riders appraised the light-stepping Dandy with longing eyes. But the sight of Dandy's eleven hundred pounds of steely sinew did not encourage them to rashness.

Outside the corral stood tall Jack Shellhorn, with a look of admiration and eagerness in his deep-set blue eyes as they watched Dandy through the corral fence. His hips were so small they would hardly support his bibless overalls and new bat-wing chaparejos. But a trained eye might have suspected unusual power in his well set shoulders. His face was too bone-lined, too tanned, too rugged to be handsome.

"Mr. Shellhorn," came a low, resonant voice from behind him, "why don't you get in there and call that bet?"

Almost as if startled, Shellhorn turned to face a slender young cowgirl with frank, hazel eyes that matched the chestnut curl of hair dropping below her worn brown Stetson.

"A pilgrim like me ride that critter?" he exclaimed.

The girl lowered her voice and drew him away. Sherd Mortimer's eyes were rolling white at them from atop the corral fence.

"You can't fool me," she told Shellhorn frankly. "You're not the tenderfoot you're pretending to be. That slight bow in your legs, the way you handle stock when you think nobody is watching, the very way you touch a horse—all mark you as a man bred to saddle leather. I'm not asking your reasons for playing pilgrim, but I am asking you to get in there and break Dandy for me. I want him for my own horse.

"It's absolutely foolish for me to do it, Miss Nan," he answered, "but I'd try to ride a locomotive rollin' down a mountainside, ef yuh come at me thataway about it. I've had a reason for playin' tenderfoot, but I didn't think none of yuh in the round-up had seen through me, in the week I've been here."

"They have, though," Nan Pennington informed him. "Some have even hinted that—that–

The pretty girl hesitated to finish the sentence. Shellhorn understood. They had passed out of view of the corrals, over behind the high creek bank.

"It's shore mighty fine of yuh to put faith in me and tell me," he declared, without waiting for her to stammer through her intended statement.

His big hands were reaching out hesitatingly, awkwardly for hers. Their hands barely touched. Nan's eyes dropped; a crimson flush crept over her face. Shellhorn's face already felt like fire. When he did clutch her hands, it was with a grip that made her wince.

"It won't be long" he told her, in a low voice charged with the might of a range man's love, "till I can explain everything. Then, Nan, I'm goin' to tell yuh somethin' else, too. Hope yuh won't be too put out with me, us knowin' each other only a week."

All at once he dropped her hands and hurried back to the corrals.

"A-ha," Mortimer exclaimed, "here comes the pilgrim. Looks like he wants to ride the bay."

"I might try it," Shellhorn replied, "if yuh could make it worth my while."

"A hundred dollars," Mortimer reminded, again flaunting the bills.

"Chicken feed!" Shellhorn scoffed. "Let's see some real money."

Mortimer flushed at the slight to his hundred dollars. Some of the cowboys grinned to see the foreman from the neighboring ranch taken down a notch or two. Mortimer dug into his breeches pocket. In a moment he had counted out all he had, four hundred and one dollars.

"Match that, blowhard!" he growled, slamming the money down on the seat of a saddle.

"That's easy," Shellhorn smiled. He fumbled into his shirt and drew out a thin kangaroo money belt. From it he counted five hundred dollars in gold. "Five hundred or nothing," he stipu

lated, placing the money beside Mortimer's. "I'll take yore check for one hundred pesos, to make it even money."

Mortimer glanced about him, as though he feared he was cornered. It was clear that he had not expected anybody to be able to cover his original hundred-dollar bet, much less to raise the ante to five times that amount. A close observer might have guessed that his open flaunting of the cash had been done as much to impress Nan Pennington with his financial standing as to cheapen a certain other rider in her eyes.

For months now, Mortimer had been pressing his attentions upon the girl. Particularly had he been emphasizing the fact that he was flush with money. First, because he was the kind who imagined that money went a long way toward winning a girl's heart. Next, he knew that Nan's father was sorely in need of cash.

Here at the end of the round-up, the modest Pennington Rafter P Ranch had only some fifty horses to show for the year's crop, when, but for the mysterious disappearance of horses, it should have had at least two hundred.

And there was no market for the horses, now that they were gathered. The big KL outfit, for which Mortimer was foreman, had just turned over six hundred head of horses to a buyer who took only that many because they had contracted for them.

For a moment it looked as though Mortimer were going to back down on the bet. But Nan was coming toward them. He couldn't well back down, with her looking on.

"All right," he snapped at Shellhorn. "Maybe you think I haven't got money in the bank, eh? I'd as soon make it a thousand dollars, now that I have to write a check."

"Nope, five hundred suits me," Shellhorn declined. "Any regulations on how I ride?"

"Saddle and mount by yourself," Mortimer stipulated, "and stay with him till he quits. No buckhooks, hobbled stirrups or pullin' leather. And you've got to rake him."

"It all goes," Shellhorn agreed, "except that last. Miss Nan wants Dandy for her saddle horse after I've broke him, and she won't want him raked."

"You seem to be terribly set on what Nan says," Mortimer leered.

Cowboys winked slyly at each other. Mortimer unconsciously had betrayed the real reason for his enmity toward Shellhorn—the fact that Nan smiled upon the newcomer to the Hundred Mesa range.

Shellhorn took his three-quarter saddle from the back of the claybank he had been riding. Carrying it by the horn, he jingled his way into the corral. Hardly before Dandy knew it, Shellhorn had his head down to a snubbing post. Soothing the horse with low, coaxing words, the cowboy eased the saddle on and cinched it up. Then he turned the horse's head loose and swung to the saddle.

Dandy was coming undone the same instant. For twenty terrific seconds he pitched like so much dynamite was bursting inside of him. Then he stopped into a "sull" for a moment. That was only a preliminary to what followed. Instead of the running buck, he threw all his fierce might into a "walk beam," then "fence-cornered" and "sunfished."

They had dropped the corral bars down, and out these Dandy pitched. Still Shellhorn was riding him with that same easy, whip-lash suppleness, sitting straight in the saddle when the force of the horse's plunges was not lashing him up and down.

Unable to rid his back of the tenacious rider, Dandy ran away. Shellhorn let him go to his heart's content. At last he brought him back to the corrals, sullen, conquered, but not broken-spirited. Dandy actually stood with his drooping nose in the crook of Shelhorn's arm as the cowboy turned on Mortimer.

"Satisfied?" he asked, without boastfulness or taunt.

"Yes, I am satisfied," Mortimer blurted out. "I knew I'd lose that five hundred dollars, but I give it free to prove what I've been tellin' some people—that it's mighty funny why you'd come in here playin' tenderfoot! Now what other reason could there be for it than that gutted herd?"

Mortimer waved at the small herd of Rafter P horses across the creek. Everybody knew that the Rafter P horses had been disappearing in small bunches for months.

"Yuh mean to insinuate," Shellhorn asked slowly, in a voice still lower than his usual quiet tones, "that I'm a horse thief?"

"Take it any way you want to," Mortimer flared, stepping still nearer and thrusting his heavy jaw out at Shellhorn.

Each man wore a Colt on his hip. Mortimer had his hand on the ornate handle of his weapon as he spoke. Regardless of that threat, Shellhorn suddenly stepped into him and hooked his left fist upward. Mortimer brought his gun leaping out, but he was a bit too drag-handed.

Shellhorn's fist jabbed into that outthrust chin too quickly. The big fellow reeled, with eyes suddenly gone glassy. Shellhorn slapped the gun from the limp hand and let his addled enemy stagger over to the fence to save himself from falling.

"I look for proof," Shellhorn told him, "before I slobber out statements like that."

Mortimer pulled himself together and glared at Shellhorn. There was a new suspicion in his eyes, but he was discreet enough to hold his tongue.

"Grub pile!" came the lusty call of the round-up cook, from the clump of cottonwoods out of sight over by the dry creek.

That broke up the tension of the moment. Shellhorn turned his back on Mortimer, and walked alone toward the camp kitchen. Somehow he felt a little lonely. That accusation of Mortimer's set him apart from the other regular hands of both outfits. He might have joined Nan Pennington on the way to the kitchen, but he kept to himself.

He even poured his own water in washing his hands and face, before eating. After filling his tin plate with steak, frijoles and stewed peaches, he went out beyond the bed wagon and squatted on his heels to eat by himself. But Nan brought her plate and spread a piece of tanned cowhide on the ground, to sit beside him.

"Would you mind," she asked, "if I ask you to go away with Dad after supper? He's going off to find a buyer for our horses, while we hold them here."

"Why should I go?" Shellhorn wanted to know.

"Because Mortimer will try to get even with you."

"But I don't feel like runnin' from him."

At that refusal, a silence fell between the two young people. Nan made an excuse to get some more coffee in her tin cup. She did not come back to him, but sat down with her father and his little crew

This consisted only of a pair of American cowboys too old to draw top wages, a Mexican rider and Tony, a fifteen-year-old Mexican wrangler. Nan herself had been taking a man's place with her father's short-handed outfit on the joint round-up.

After her father left by himself, Mortimer's eleven riders caught fresh mounts and set out for the home ranch, taking their work remuda with them. Only the cook was left to bring home the chuck wagon the next day. But Mortimer himself stayed.

"No tellin' what might happen," he told Nan, "and besides, I'm stayin' on to give Shellhorn another try at me. He won't take me unawares the next time. But I'm liable to give that gent a surprise or two himself."

There was a sinister ring in that threat. Long after she had retired into her patched, mildewed little six-

by-eight tent that night, Nan pondered over his meaning and its probable results to Jack Shellhorn. Sleeplessness kept her twisting for hours on the thin cotton mattress between her and the ground.

As if in keeping with her unrest, thunder began to rumble back in the mountains at whose foot the camp lay. Within another hour, lightning was flashing. Then it rained, a veritable downpour common to the Southwest in August. In due time the big creek was roaring down by the camp. It lulled Nan to sleep.

At dawn she heard the cook muttering disgruntled epithets at the wet kitchen, kindling and what not. Then a startled exclamation broke from the old fellow. In a moment he was yelling the camp up. Hastily jerking on boots and giving her long curls a twist, Nan hurried out. The cook was pointing at a small clump of blackjack oak in a low corner-like cove, which ran back from the opposite bank of the creek.

At first Nan could see nothing. Then somebody pointed out to her a dark object against the lower trunk of a blackjack. Tony, the night wrangler! The lower part of his body was still under water. But the water in the rincon had receded enough from the floods pouring down the hillsides beyond, to expose the boy's drooping head. He had been drowned while tied to the foot of the tree. A gag was still in his mouth.

There could have been but one object in tying him up. That was to get the horses which he had been guarding. On higher ground farther on, less than ten of the original herd were left. In all probability the horse thieves had not thought of the excessive flood waters coming in and drowning the lad thus disposed of. But his death was their work just the same.

Nan looked about her. Every member of the camp was there, except one. Jack Shellhorn was missing! Mortimer at first seemed deeply concerned about this. Then he forced his worry to the background and fastened his whitish eyes on Nan's face.

"Count noses," he suggested ironically, "and see if we're all here."

Nan's whole body was trembling with numb fear. She could not believe this of Jack Shellhorn, yet the force of Mortimer's hints began to make them seem realities. The horses had been run off. Shellhorn was gone. What was more, he had been masquerading under the guise of a greenhorn, without giving her any satisfactory explanation when she took him to task about it.

"It's a shame," Mortimer went on, enjoying the pain in the young woman's face, "for such a nice boy to turn out to be a horse thief. And the creek's up too high for us to get across and catch him. Too bad, too bad, especially when it just about ruins your dad complete, to lose these horses."

"We haven't lost them yet," Nan vowed, pulling the droop from her straight shoulders. "It looks as though the thieves picked a time when the swollen creek would cut off pursuit. But I'm following those thieves—and murderers!"

"Those?" Mortimer echoed. "There's nobody to be in with Shellhorn, unless you figure he had secret pards in the brush."

"I'm not accusing Jack Shellhorn!" the girl flashed back at Mortimer. "I'm merely going to find out who stole the horses and—and—did that!"

She pointed across the creek again, at the dead wrangler. At the same moment she was wondering why she still could defend Shellhorn. Beyond all doubt, he had something to do with the bold theft of the horses.

Hastening to her tent, she buckled on a .38 Colt special. Then she thrust a sandwich into the bosom of her brown shirt, secured a running iron and the long rope used by the outfit to hold the remuda while roping mounts, and started up the creek. She had to walk, for there was not a horse on this side

of the stream. She asked nobody to go with her.

The three Rafter P hands were not equal to the task she had in mind, even had they been willing to attempt its hazards. She did not want Mortimer along; especially not if she found that Shellhorn was the thief. Not that she meant to spare him. Spare a horse thief? No, never!

Mortimer followed anyway, trying to turn her back. He had guessed her intent. Nan did not even answer his objections. She soon reached a brushy point where the stream cut through a rocky little gorge. Here the creek was no more than sixty feet across. But it roared and churned down over rapids in such mad abandon that neither man nor beast ever could have survived its fury.

Tying the rope securely to the running iron, she moved down onto a jagged point of rock. There, twirling the iron at the end of the rope, she gave it a high heave. It landed across on the other side, among the brush and sharp-pointed rocks.

When she pulled on it, the running iron caught between the stump of a bush and a rock. It was not as secure an anchorage as she had hoped to get, but several tugs failed to dislodge it. She made her end of the rope secure to the jagged point of rock.

"Nan," Mortimer cried, surveying the contraption, "you're not goin' to try to cross that!"

"Yes, I am."

Mortimer seized her by one arm and a hand. "No," he shouted above the roar of the plunging waters, "I'll never let you! I love you too much for that, my little dear. And you're mine now, when there's nobody else to come between us—not even horse thieves."

Just for a moment Nan was moved by the man's passionate avowal. She did not care for him, never could. But she did believe that he loved her, and just then she was in no mood to place some value on any man's genuine regard.

Mortimer, encouraged by her one fleeting moment of weakness, tried to clutch her into his arms. But she lurched free of his grasp and leaped for the rope. The next moment she was going hand over hand along the rope, out over the raging flood. Over her shoulder she glimpsed Mortimer watching her with horror in his eyes. The rope sagged down in the middle until the frothy waters were licking at her boot toes.

Then the running iron anchor slipped. Nan gasped as the rope let her start for the water. But the iron caught again on something and halted her fall. The abruptness of the halt, however, tore her left hand loose from the rope. And the water, now about her knees, was trying to tear the right hand loose.

She grabbed at the rope with her left hand, and missed. Twice more she clutched upward for a new hold. On the fourth upward grab she got her left hand on the rope again. Once more she pulled along, hand over hand, until at last she got a foot on solid rock and pushed up to safety. For a moment she sat on the bank, regaining her strength.

Then, ignoring Mortimer's shouts and waving, she motioned for him to release the rope from the rock. Drawing the rope across to her, she started back down the creek. Her first aim was to procure a horse from the few that remained. She roped the horse that had been Tony's, because it was the only one that wore a saddle.

Nine o'clock found her riding up Calf Hoof Ridge, toward the fastness of the Sierra Oro Mountains. The rain had beat out all trace of the stolen horses. But she knew that the rustlers would have to take the stock through the Sierra Oro. While the mountains were rough and rugged, there was a fair trail all the way across their fifty miles of uninhabited width.

She discovered that the rain had been less severe deeper in the mountains. Sometimes veritable cloudbursts over

one watershed will turn that creek into a raging torrent, while ten miles away another stream will hardly rise at all. Soon the rain had stopped entirely. In another two hours she was following the unwashed tracks of the rustled horses.

All day she trailed them, and until the forking of the trails after dark made her seek a lonely camp beneath the overhanging edge of a cliff. But by break of day she was again in the saddle and trailing the Rafter P herd. To her displeasure, Mortimer came crowding a big gray horse behind her before she had gone a mile.

"Chuck Allbright happened along," he explained, upon overtaking her, "and the creek went down to where I could swim it, by takin' my life in my hands. So I borrowed Chuck's pony, and here I am, to see that no harm comes to you."

As they rode on, Mortimer evinced more concern about the thieves ahead than was necessary, merely for Nan's safety. He wanted to ride on in advance, claiming that it would be better for him to encounter the rustlers alone.

"No," the girl vowed, "I'm riding this trail to a finish."

Accordingly, she kept pace with the KL foreman. Mortimer seemed to grow more uneasy. Before sunup Nan's nostrils caught the aroma of boiling coffee and the savory smell of frying bacon, coming up the canyon. Soon Mortimer also was sniffing the air, secretly.

"I've got to go on ahead," he began to Nan. "I just can't see you ride on any farther, with danger too certain ahead like this."

Again Nan was misled. She thought his repeated wish to keep her behind was due entirely to his solicitation for her safety. There was a ray of warmth to her in this, but only because of the chill that was in her heart.

"I'm going on," she declared, nevertheless.

She was ahead when they rounded the next turn. There she stopped and held up a warning hand. Then they led their horses off into a cluster of spruce, and went forward on foot. In another ten minutes she and Mortimer, with guns drawn, were easing their heads up over a brush-shielded rock not fifteen yards from the campfire. Mortimer nodded across toward the fire, as much as to say, "See for yourself."

Nan did see for herself. Sitting with side profiles to the pair was a little rat-eyed Mexican and a stout, wooly-faced American. Nearer her was the broad back of Jack Shellhorn!

"Now," the bearded man was saying, "we better guzzle down this chuck quick and be a-shovin' them brutes on. We got a good start, but them creeks might go down quicker'n we expect and then Mortimer might not be able to hold back—"

The man got no further. Mortimer suddenly interrupted the conversation by throwing his guns down across the rock and calling for a surrender. The Mexican and the bearded rustler gave one look and threw their hands up. Shellhorn never moved from his squatting position before he too raised his hands. When he did twist his head about, it was to face both of Mortimer's guns and also Nan's leveled .38.

"From the looks of the artillery," he said, with a cold smile, "yuh'd think I was the only hombre bein' held up."

"You're the main thief, Mr. Shellhorn," Mortimer grated, "and have been the brains of this horse thief ring that's ruined the Rafter P Ranch. Nan, go take their guns."

Nan moved out from the covering, but her knees almost gave way beneath her. Jack Shellhorn had his blue eyes riveted on her face. With a forced upward tilt of her slightly snubbed nose, she marched on toward him. He would never know what he had meant to her, she resolved. In spite of her resolution, however, it was almost mechanical hands which pulled Shellhorn's one gun from its holster.

"You go bring our horses," Morti-

mer next ordered her, after she had the trio disarmed. "Also, bring two saddle horses from the herd. They have one hitched in the bushes here."

Nan was glad to get away for a moment. Her face was white, her heart cold. Once away, she thought she would get control of herself. How silly anyway, to become so upset because she was arresting a horse thief.

"Miss Nan," Shellhorn called after her, "I'd rather yuh didn't go after the ponies till we come to a better understandin'. I've found out some purty strong information and—"

"Information, I suppose," Nan cut in, glad of the chance to show this horse thief how little she cared, "on the best market for the rustled horses!"

Without waiting for further words, the girl pretended light-heartedness, carrying the captured guns with her. Shellhorn could not long take his eyes from Mortimer.

"So you have information, eh?" Mortimer bit out menacingly, when the girl was out of hearing. "Job, what did you fools let out? Not, though, that it makes much difference, in this case."

Shellhorn caught the significance of those words. They were a sentence of death in themselves.

"Ain't he in with us?" the bearded Job Raynor demanded rather sheepishly.

"No, fool. I guess you spilled the whole thing."

"Well," the uncomfortable Raynor defended, "he showed us your check for a hundred dollars, and that looked to us like you had paid him that much to come on and help us through."

"A-ha!" Mortimer exulted. "So that's why you tricked me into writin' a check, eh? Just to get chummy with my hired hands, so? Pretty slick, Mr. Shellhorn, but hardly slick enough.

"Boys"—and here Mortimer winked knowingly at Raynor and Palomas Pete, the Mexican—"you prisoners better not try to escape from me."

Shellhorn knew that the showdown had come. "Mortimer," he said slowly, "I see yore lousy trick. Yuh will let these two tools of yores escape, but will shoot me down and claim it had to be done while I was escapin'. But I'm not turnin' my back on yuh, and a death wound from the front would show I was not runnin' away."

"But," Mortimer declared, "it would be perfectly lawful to shoot a man in the breast when he was chargin' you, even if he didn't have a gun."

For a moment the four men stood motionless and silent, while the Mexican and Raynor glanced at Mortimer for the final nod. Shellhorn saw no way of escape, except to rush Mortimer. The foreman would kill him most certainly on that rush. But he might get to him and turn the killer's gun on him before he lost consciousness.

"All right, boys," Mortimer called to his two confederates.

The two men broke into a run. But in their excitement and haste, they bumped together on their first steps. The heavier Raynor knocked the Mexican backward toward Shellhorn. Instantly, Shellhorn leaped behind Palomas Pete and caught him as a shield.

In his quick alarm at the miscarrying of his plans, Mortimer missed with his first hasty shot and flattened the second bullet only against the handle of the Mexican's gun. Shellhorn now had the swarthy little man in his arms and was rushing toward Mortimer.

Mortimer began a backward retreat while he continued his desperate attempt to hit some part of Shellhorn's body not sheltered by Palomas Pete's. Even though Mortimer should have been so ruthless and so indiscreet as to have wasted a precious bullet of the moment in killing Palomas Pete, the Mexican's body still would have been a shield for the charging Shellhorn.

Palomas Pete was clawing frantically at Shellhorn's face and trying to squirm loose. Shellhorn only gripped him the tighter and rushed on for the man with the gun.

One bullet stung lightly through an exposed section of his side. Another bit loose the lower lobe of his left ear. By now he was within ten feet of the smoking gun muzzle. Mortimer tripped over a stone in his backward retreat.

The instant he started down, Shellhorn dropped Palomas Pete and dived headlong for the falling Mortimer. Mortimer whirled on his back and fired again. But he overshot the diving Shellhorn and then the latter was upon him.

Mortimer tried to ram the gun muzzle into his antagonist's body. But Shellhorn had got a grip on the weapon, too. From up the canyon there came the clatter of horse's feet, telling that Nan was rushing back. At first Job Raynor and Palomas Pete continued on their false escape.

Over and over Shellhorn and Mortimer whirled, until they lodged in the low creek. Shellhorn landed on top and began crushing his adversary's head under the water with one knee, while at the same time he was trying to wrench the latter's gun from him.

When Mortimer's head went under the water, he turned loose the Colt and blubbered out a cry for mercy. Shellhorn sprang back, to allow the fellow to get up. Then he whirled about to flash the gun on Raynor and Palomas Pete, who were rushing back to help their boss, in spite of appearances.

But just then a loop dropped over Shellhorn's head, with Nan Pennington at the home end of the rope. Shellhorn was jerked backward. The next moment he was being dragged down the creek, through sand and water. Mortimer leaped up and came tearing after him. Shellhorn was bumped along so roughly over rocks and through pools, that he was unable either to use the gun or to fight free of the girl's rope.

Mortimer caught up with them and lunged down upon the helpless Shellhorn. A fist-sized stone in his hand crashed against Shellhorn's skull.

"Got him!" he cried exultantly.

Shellhorn was sinking into the water. Nan dragged him to shore and dropped down beside him. There was a queer choking in her throat. She felt as though she had betrayed somebody, instead of having helped capture a horse thief. Her heart thumped madly as she wiped away the red stain from the gash which Mortimer's stone had made on the unconscious man's upper forehead.

She turned Shellhorn over on his back. As she did so, she noticed a bright object drop from the inside waistband of his breeches. Hastily the girl clamped her hand over it before Mortimer saw it. Then hot, scalding tears trickled down over her face.

"What's the matter?" Mortimer scolded. "Chicken-hearted because you've captured a rustler chief?"

"No," she answered slowly, "I'm just crying because—because—"

"At what you've found out about Mr. Shellhorn," Mortimer finished for her.

"Yes, that's it exactly," she replied.

When Nan entered the battle so decisively with her loop, Raynor and Palomas Pete again had broken away on their feigned escape. For all the girl knew, they might have been coming to help Shellhorn instead of Mortimer. Now, however, Nan leaped up.

"Come on," she summoned Mortimer, "and let's capture the other two. Quick—before they get to the horses."

Mortimer had to make a pretense of following, for Shellhorn was patently too unconscious to trouble anybody for the time being. Nan led the dash after the two men, who were racing up the canyon toward the horse which she had left. Mortimer followed reluctantly on his own horse left near the campfire.

In a moment the girl was on the heels of the escaping pair. A bullet by Raynor's ear brought both of them up short, hands raised. They glanced at the approaching Mortimer, as if to say, "Well, you'll get us out of this all right."

Mortimer's wink seemed to assure

them. If Nan saw this interchange of looks, she gave no indication of it. She marched the captured men back and kept them under her own guns while Mortimer had to go fetch enough horses for all. The chafing of his head and wrists then brought Shellhorn to his senses. He apparently chose to hold his tongue.

"I'll ride ahead of the herd with these crooks," Mortimer told Nan, "while you drive your horses behind me."

"Not tyin' us up at all?" Shellhorn asked meaningly.

"No," Mortimer answered, "because my guns will do for rawhide, if you try to bolt again."

"Sherd, have you ever killed a man?" Nan asked, with a queer note in her voice.

"Of course not," Mortimer vowed. "Why?"

"Then," Nan told him, "I wouldn't have you do it on this trip, for anything in the world."

"Nan, you mean," Mortimer asked in unbelief, "that—that you want to keep my hands unstained? You care about me that way?"

Mortimer was edging closer to her.

"Perhaps," the girl affirmed coyly, "I would not like to see your hands stained with the blood of this horse thief!" And she nodded at Shellhorn.

"Nan, you do love me—are going to be mine!" Mortimer cried.

She eluded his attempted embrace, although answering, "I will be yours, Sherd, but only if a rope stretches the necks of these rustlers."

"It sure will," Mortimer declared. "We've got 'em dead to rights this time."

While Mortimer turned to give his confederates a sly look of assurance against such a promised fate, Shellhorn was trying to get Nan's eye. But she avoided his look, and suggested that they be on their way. Shellhorn was gravely puzzled by the girl's words and acts.

"We're leaving the herd here, all but my Dandy horse," she ruled. "They won't stray far, and—"

"But I can help you drive 'em," Mortimer urged, "and handle the prisoners safe, too."

"No," Nan answered decisively. "I'm going to see to it myself that these men are taken back safe some place, say the KL headquarters. And I don't know cowboys at all if they ever let these three rustlers live to see the sheriff. No, they'll hang them quick as that!"

She snapped her fingers and smiled at Mortimer. Then she requested that they go across and get the horse Dandy. When Mortimer had roped the bay, Nan surprised them all by asking Shellhorn to saddle and ride Dandy.

"But that horse could outrun anything here, if Shellhorn bolts," Mortimer objected.

"I want Dandy taken back," Nan held out, "and Mr. Shellhorn won't dare bolt on him. Besides, as soon as Dandy is subdued, we'll tie each prisoner's hands to the saddle horn."

"Well, Shellhorn better not try to bolt," Mortimer growled, patting a gun.

Shellhorn had less trouble with Dandy this time. The cowboy had proved himself the master, in their first battle. After some fair pitching, hemmed up in the narrow bottom of the side canyon, the horse submitted to the tug of bridle reins and the touch of spurs.

At Dandy's second submission, Shellhorn found himself at the upper end of the canyon. He might have forced the horse up over the steep ascents and escaped. But he did not want to run away now. Somehow, although he could not fathom it, he wanted to probe deeper into that look of Nan Pennington's eyes.

One thing, however, kept troubling him. Again and again on that homeward journey the girl referred to the nooses which would encircle his neck and the necks of Raynor and Palomas Pete. She unfeelingly remarked about the bull neck of Raynor and laughed.

Shellhorn was looking at her with

troubled eyes. Was the girl actually cold-hearted and bloodthirsty? The cold, taunting manner in which she repeatedly referred to the noose was making his flesh creep. Raynor and Palomas Pete seemed to take her remarks lightly at first, and once joined in the jesting about the hemp.

But the nearer they got back to the KL Ranch, with the wrists still rawhided to the saddle horns, the more the girl's repeated allusion to the noose seemed to annoy them. At three o'clock they were only five miles away from KL headquarters. Still Nan had given the prisoners not the slightest chance to escape.

"Only three more miles, Sherd," she announced. "Then—then—"

"Then what, honey?" Mortimer smiled, although it was a somewhat sickly smile.

"We'll start on our honeymoon," Nan finished, "while the KL cowboys bring in some neighbors to finish this job. I don't want to stay and see the poor wretches' feet kicking the wind."

Those words cut painfully into Shellhorn's breast. Nan *was* hard-boiled! She meant this. Meant to let him be swung up along with Raynor and the Mexican, Worse than that, though, she was willing for this scoundrelly Mortimer to carry her off as his bride.

"Say, Palomas Pete," Nan was startling Shellhorn anew by asking, "if you were not one of the unlucky ones, would you like to see men—even horse thieves—twitch and kick while they strangled to death at the end of a rope?"

"*Por dios, no!*" Palomas Pete shuddered. "Eet ees awful theeng, señorita—thees rope."

"And you, Job?" the young woman asked.

"It's all the same to me," Raynor grunted, but his words belied his outward bravado.

There now appeared some twenty horsemen on the rim of the mesa half a mile off. Mortimer pulled back in dismay at this. It was a posse out to join in the pursuit of the stolen horses, after the word had got around. The men were coming on at a swinging trot.

"Hey, Mortimer," Raynor growled, his face suddenly grave, "you see that?"

"Of course he does," Nan chimed in. "It's the posse to hang you horse thieves! And Sherd and I are starting on our honeymoon all the sooner." Nan rode up and put an arm through Mortimer's. "Too bad," she cooed to him, "that these other men haven't been noble and honest like you."

By now Shellhorn was sick of soul. He was not afraid of death. But his lip was curling with something close akin to disgust with Nan Pennington. To think that she would be so utterly enamored of a wretch like Mortimer!

Mortimer, however, was not enjoying this show of affection from the girl whom he had been trying to win. Queer looks were passing between him and Raynor and the Mexican.

"Quick, do something!" Raynor snarled.

Mortimer drew out his pocket knife and rode up with the evident intention of cutting the rawhide holding Raynor's hands to the saddle horn. "I've gone clean chicken-hearted," he declared. "I can't stand to take these men on and let them be swung."

Nan roweled her horse in between Raynor and Mortimer. "If you have grown chicken-hearted," she said measuredly, "I haven't. These thieves have got to swing."

Mortimer tried to argue. Nan cut him off.

"Don't quarrel with me," she cajoled, "when we're just ready to start on our honeymoon."

"Honeymoon, hell!" Raynor interjected. "Mortimer, do something quick, I tell you!"

What could Mortimer do without complete betrayal to himself? Nan was smiling. And Shellhorn saw for for the first time that the smile was for him; then the cowboy suddenly

gasped. Not until now had he even suspected the young woman's daring scheme.

Nan had played on the cowardice of Raynor and Palomas Pete to the finest perfection. To her goading about the noose, she had added the picture of Mortimer riding off with her, while Raynor and the Mexican hung. That was too much for coarse souls like Raynor and Palomas Pete.

"You coward!" Raynor was crying at the cornered Mortimer. "Get us out of here!"

"Oh," Nan inquired with arched brows, "Mr.. Mortimer is obligated to you? Not my dear lover, surely."

There was scorn and loathing in the ranch girl's last words. And she had brought her Colt up to stop any interference Mortimer might offer.

"Yes, him!" Raynor cried. "He got us into this and then would let us swing while he went on a honeymoon with a girl like you, the dirty double-crosser! He's engineered this whole rustlin' scheme! He's worse than us!"

Raynor was shouting aloud now his harsh accusations. Mortimer was powerless to stop him. On came the posse. Mortimer wheeled his horse and broke away. Nan jerked loose Shellhorn's thongs, and handed him a six-shooter.

"I gave you Dandy," she told him, "so you could catch anybody breaking away. Go bring him back."

Within fifteen minutes Shellhorn had the captured Mortimer back in the center of the posse. Raynor and Palomas Pete had told the whole story by this time, of how Mortimer was the brains of the horse stealing which was planned to fatten his pocketbook, and at the same time to so cripple Nan's father financially that she would be induced to marry him to recoup the family fortunes. The possemen started to make ready the hangman's nooses.

"No, no," Nan objected, "I can't let you hang them. I talked about the noose until I'm sick at thoughts of it, but I had to scare those two men into betraying their leader. Now that they have talked, I'm turning them over to the sheriff."

She had her way, and the posse promised to take the men to jail, provided Mortimer would return the worth of the horses he had stolen from Nan's father. But they were including Shellhorn among the captives. He was puzzled by the fact that Nan was looking at him with concealed amusement. He fumbled down inside his waistband.

"Boys," he began, "it's about time I was lettin' everybody know I'm not a horse thief. And resignin' from my job, too, for Miss Nan makes me look like a gander-minded simpleton at this work. But I was sent in here by—by—"

He broke off and made a more thorough search inside the breeches waistband. Then a foolish look crept over his face. And it grew into a deep flush as Nan laughed outright at him.

"Here it is," she said, holding out a small badge. "I picked it up where you lost it when I snaked you out of the creek. That's how I knew you were a detective for the Cattlemen's Association and not a rustler."

Without another word, she went galloping off by herself, toward home. Shellhorn stared after her, a bit foolishly. Some of the cowboys were grinning at him. He prodded the willing Dandy after her.

Upon galloping up beside Nan, he got a welcoming smile, as though she had hoped he would follow.

"Nan," he began, "yuh shore gave me one terrible scare, playin' up to that crook the way yuh did. And listen, Nan, yuh talked about—about a honeymoon so much, would yuh mind startin' on one with me? This five hundred dollars I won on Dandy would be enough to take us to—"

He never finished. He read his answer in Nan's tear-threatened eyes. When he tried to sweep her into his arms, the untrained Dandy plunged away spilling them both in the trail. They sat up, smiled—and were in heaven!

Hearts Undaunted

By Edith K. Norris

Cynthia was beguiled by romance and music from the enchanted land below the Border but even as she listened to the langorous love melodies of a ranchero's wooing, she caught a glimpse of a paradise more real, where a straightforward, laughing cowboy would be riding by her side.

"SO I promised Señor Miguel Cienfuegos that I'd marry him," Cynthia Carman confided to her pinto, as they jogged along under New Mexico's late afternoon sun. "But I don't really think I'm what folks would call 'in love' with him, Pal. . . .

"No, I didn't accept him for mercenary reasons, either, if that's what you mean by that sly little twitching of your ears!" the pretty little rider went on. "You see, I let him persuade me because he's handsome and romantic looking . . . especially on a horse! And because he insists he's so crazy about me, I'm bound to learn to care—Good heavens! What was that?"

From somewhere beyond the brink of a nearby arroyo bawls of sheer terror were shattering the peace of the early spring twilight. Spurring forward, Cynthia looked down into a stream of muddy water. At its edge, hoof-deep in the mire, and bogging down rapidly, struggled a steer that had strayed from the herd of the prosperous Señor Miguel. The ownership was evidenced by the creature's brand, Box-Circle-Box. And the trapped brute was advertising his distress with an ear-splitting thoroughness.

"Poor, clumsy creature! The harder he works for release, the deeper he's sucked under—"

The girl's big, sympathetic eyes were brimming over. Here was a problem! No time to gallop back to the vaqueros' bunkhouses to call for help. By the time she returned, it would surely be too late. The steer's fate would have been sealed.

There was only one alternative, and she looked down at it uneasily. The rope on her saddle—Señor Miguel, himself an expert with the reata, had been giving her instructions in its use. She was very far from skilful. But to stand by idly, in an emergency like this, and see that poor animal perish—

"I've just got to make a try for his salvation," she decided, quickly building her loop.

Again and again, the reata flew out, without landing. The girl's sweetly curved lips began quivering in chagrin. Then, almost by accident, the noose circled those wildly tossing horns, and its thrower smiled and dimpled in happy satisfaction.

Jerking the rope taut, Cynthia snubbed the home end of it on her saddle horn, and backed Pal up the bank. Responding to repeated and encouraging tugs, the partly engulfed animal renewed its former efforts, and made a desperate battle for freedom. A few great heaves, a final wild plunge, and its hoofs were at last on dry ground.

In her all-absorbing eagerness to do a kindly turn, it had never occurred to the girl that her charitable action might prove to be short-sighted. Vaguely, perhaps, she had visioned that grateful steer tossing off the loosening noose, and dashing joyfully to rejoin his kind. But it was something very different that actually happened. The unreasoning brute, completely befuddled by his fright and excitement, had no sooner reached dry ground than he lowered his menacing head and started straight at his erstwhile saviour!

Cynthia sat rigid, eyes widening in consternation. Her startled brain simply refused to function. But Pal, scenting danger with a snort, made a bolt for safer territory.

Fighting off the deadly numbness born of horror, Cynthia managed at last, to cast free the reata. The steer, tripping and stumbling as the hemp first slackened, lost ground, while the pinto gained a trifle. But almost immediately the steer was up again, with his purpose unaltered.

The girl groaned hopelessly. What an agony of dread was in her fainting young heart during those few, torturing seconds! No chance in the world of outdistancing that onrushing peril . . . it was almost at Pal's flank now. Glancing back she gave herself up for lost.

Suddenly, coming on the trail of the steer, Cynthia heard the rush of a steadily pursuing whirlwind. A mustang sprang into view. A stalwart figure fairly hurtled from its back, in the direction of the charging animal.

A long right arm then shot over the steer's neck, and a powerful right hand gripped his nose, while the newcomer's left hand closed around the bull's left horn. The "dogger," now clear of the ground, lunged his huge body downward against his own left elbow, twisting the neck of the brute so effectually that it soon lost its balance and fell.

Pal, with a cow-pony's almost unbelievable sagacity, recognized the cessation of danger and came calmly to a halt. His rider, still panting and

shaken, gazed speechlessly at her rescuer.

"If you'll get a piece behind me, ma'am," the young man remarked, smiling pleasantly, "you'll be out of harm's way. I'm aimin' to turn this critter loose. That dust cloud, way off yonder, more'n likely marks the herd outer which he strayed."

Cynthia obeyed with alacrity.

Cautiously, the cowman released his captive. Still nursing its senseless fury, it turned on him, pronto. But the ranchman had evidently foreseen this very move, and was prepared for it. Instantly, his threatening bullet was whizzing along the level of its ears. A second shot—a third. Confused and worsted, the clumsy brute wheeled discreetly, and made off in the direction of the mushroom-shaped dust cloud.

Cynthia sized up her rescuer, as they rode toward each other. What a perfectly stunning specimen of virility and rangeland brawn! His red bandanna contrasted strikingly with the gray of his shirt, leather chaparejos, and wide-brimmed Stetson. The crown of the latter, quadruple-dented into a peak, proclaimed him immediately as a citizen of the Southwest. And as he snatched off this head covering, at their meeting, the girl noted a heavy shock of brown hair above keenly observant eyes of the same color.

"I saw your dilemma from far off, and hollered to give notice I was a-comin'. Reckon you were some preoccupied, and didn't hear me."

"I don't ever remember having been any busier," admitted Cynthia, her laugh not quite steady. "But you needn't think I objected to the way you interrupted!" More seriously, then, she went on to express her gratitude. But in spite of the general politeness of his attitude, he seemed hardly to take in what she was saying. He was, in fact, searching her features with such frank intentness, that the pallor her trying experience had brought was giving way to mounting color.

"Shucks!" he ejaculated, beamingly, as though satisfied at last by his scrutiny. "If you're not that same sweet little Cynthia Carman, that was some grades below me when I went to school at Leavenworth! Don't you know me? I'm Nick Sheldon. The lanky, pestiverous sonuvagun that used to tweak your long yaller braids for you— And the color hasn't changed from bein' pretty, even if you do loop it up, and let it curl now!"

Cynthia stared up at him, a little blankly. Nick Sheldon! Well, Nature certainly had been mighty kind to him.

"It's funny I didn't know you"—her laugh had become more normal—"considering how I secretly adored you, when we were kids! You had a crush on the teacher, almost old enough to be your mother, and you never even saw us little girls!"

"Calf love sure is the beatenest thing," he chuckled, plainly delighted at these reminiscences, and this chance encounter. "Whatever became of that teacher, after my folks moved down to San Antone?"

"She married a widower with five children."

"That kinda puts her out o' the race, and," he grinned daringly, "leaves you with nary a rival."

"Speaking of rivals—do you remember how often we scrapped it out together, in those prize-contest spelling matches?"

"They always ended by you lickin' me. You had the knack of sorta lappin' up edjercation."

"It's stood me in good stead. I'm teaching now, to earn my living."

"Shucks, there can't possibly be a school in this sparse region!"

"I'm doing private work, at the rancheria of Señor Miguel Cienfuegos."

The young man's jaw positively dropped, and his brow darkened rather peculiarly.

"So that greaser has a kid, huh?"

She answered with dignity, "The

boy I teach—Felipe—is the son of the Señor's Nicaraguan housekeeper. I understand she's the widow of a man who died in the señor's service. Being generous, he has provided for Señora Valdivia and her child. I'd rather you wouldn't use that term 'greaser'. . . . But I've never yet met a Texas cowboy that wasn't prejudiced against Mexicans—"

"Where is he now—in Pitted Canyons?"

"Yes." She stared up at him in surprise. "But how could you know that?"

He answered, evasively, "He's the only cattle owner in these parts that ever has any luck, going in there after strays, from what I hear." Their mounts having started, they jogged aimlessly through the twilight.

"Are you working in these parts?" asked the girl.

He seemed to be choosing his words as he replied. "I'm occupyin' a lineman's cabin on the boundary of the land owned by the Lucky 'Leven outfit."

"Right on the borders of Pitted Canyon?" She shuddered at the thought.

No region had ever had an uglier reputation than Pitted Canyons. And its bad name was well earned. According to Lucky 'Leven riders, who attempted to enter it from the south, from time to time, the maze of canyons was patrolled by a band of outlaws whose only code was the dealing of ruthless death to all intruders.

Ranchers living on the Reversed Crescent land which bordered the vast canyon country to the east, had lost so many hands in hunting strays in that grim no man's land that their men had been refusing pointblank to go after lost cattle. But Box-Circle-Box vaqueros, entering from the rim at the north, had often returned to report victorious battles.

According to the general belief, the stock appropriated by the ruffians in the canyon was driven westward, then north, across an almost desert waste, where their secret trail ran between screening dune formations. But up to the present date, no real information had ever been gathered. The situation was tied up in mere conjectures.

"Six months ago, when I was first here," said Cynthia, "I rambled into those canyons by accident. Señor Miguel was wild, when he came after me. Yet I've seen Señora Valdivia, the housekeeper, go in there, without mishap. Miguel says if the bandits recognized her as belonging to the Box-Circle-Box, they'd not molest her, because he's beaten them so often that now they're afraid of him— Nick, what made you look that way?"

"It's too soon to tell you."

"Don't talk in riddles, please!"

He looked down at her seriously for some seconds.

"Would you be cut up much if you lost your job, Cynthia?"

She looked somewhat flustered.

"Why, no," she said, self-consciously, "because—I'm expecting—very soon to—to get married. Señor Miguel has asked me—"

"Cienfuegos? Lord, don't tell me that, child!"

He reined in both horses with what seemed a single gesture. Bridling, Cynthia looked up into a face that was like dead ashes in which two dark coals glowed.

"He's kind, courteous, attractive—" she defended her choice all the more defiantly because of certain hidden doubts her soul was already beginning to harbor.

"Course—while he's luring you into his clutches!"

"Nick! I'd be terribly angry if it wasn't that I'm remembering the service you've just done me."

"You'd be better off killed by that steer, than living to marry Cienfuegos!"

"That's pretty strong language!"

"My feelin's are strong. And so are my reasons for sayin' those words."

"There comes Señor Miguel now,"

she said, sharply. "Do cool off, Nick. He'll want to meet and thank you—"

"To thunder with his thanks! And I don't happen to feel any cravin' to be meetin' that hombre, just now. The time for that's comin', and I can wait for it! Don't do anything reckless, till you hear from me. I'll send you a message in a day or two. Good-by, till then—"

He was gone, leaving her with a sense of irritation at his rudeness, and one of curiosity over his mysterious outburst.

Still puzzled, she rode slowly to Cienfuegos, a rather glamorous figure, despite the fact that he was many years her senior. His concha-studded leather vest and chaparejos were almost the color of the splendid brown buckskin he rode so superbly. And the scarlet of his sash and shaggy-surfaced sombrero made his swarthy skin and flashing black eyes all the more picturesque.

Catching sight of his heart's desire, now, the señor spurred forward, with extravagant expressions of delight at being back with her. Then he broke off to chide her with being unresponsive to his greeting.

"I dispatch my work so quickly, in the anxiety to hasten back to you, my lovely white flower. I find you cruel and cold—"

"I'm nervous, I guess." She quickly started to give an account of the ordeal through which she had passed, in order to change the subject. He proved full of quick sympathy—and of jealous curiosity about the young man whose good fortune it had been to save her from tragedy.

Secretly annoyed at the vivid impression made on her by Nick Sheldon's personality, Cynthia stressed him as little as possible in telling her story. But for some reason, the ranchero seemed to regret that she apparently had gathered so vague an impression.

"I have had some reports of a stranger," he said, casually, as they were approaching the splendidly constructed rancheria, beyond which showed the bunkhouse and barns. And then he launched into a description of Nick Sheldon that proved his report had undoubtedly come from a person who had seen the tall cowman who had once been her schoolmate.

It flashed over the girl that these ranch people might be very stupidly suspecting Nick of too much interest in their cattle, so she held stoutly to her pose of having been too upset by her hairbreadth escape to have been observant.

Still pleading shattered nerves, the girl retired to her room after the evening meal. She was guiltily conscious that Miguel had been anticipating hours of rapture beneath the moon, since, so far, their engagement had not even been sealed with a single caress. She had, in fact, only accepted his proposal a few moments before he rode away into Pitted Canyons.

Bending over her hand as she came out to wave farewell, Miguel had importuned her for the hundredth time to accept his heart and fortune. Half flattered, half fascinated, she had obeyed the impulse to gratify his longing with her consent, just as his vaqueros swept up, ready for the start. And she was not one to break faith without serious cause.

Pacing her bedroom floor, Cynthia made up her mind, with more fervor than the decision seemed to warrant, that she would never see Nick Sheldon any more. What right had he to call the polished gentleman she had elected to marry a "greaser" who was luring her into his clutches? To sneer, when she spoke of how Miguel's valor in battle had terrorized the dreaded bandits of Pitted Canyons? To be so insultingly startled at the mere thought of her becoming the wealthy señor's wife?

She was very angry, too, with herself. Why had her loyalty, when Miguel sought Nick's description, leaned more toward her old friend, than toward her future husband?

"Maybe I really thought Nick might have been on Box-Circle-Box land for no good purpose, and just defended him because he saved my life—"

That thought brought back the memory of his well timed and beautifully executed feat, and she felt herself thrill anew to the daring of it. And having reached that vital point, she could not stop herself from recalling every word he had spoken.

THE moon, rising later the following night, found Señor Miguel Cienfuegos enjoying better fortune. Strumming love songs on his guitar, he was seated beside the object of his ardor, in one shadowy corner of the patio.

Cynthia warmed to the music. Her pulses throbbed with a strange yearning that sent a dream-mist to sweetly befog her brain. New longings were waking at those passionately crooned melodies. Uncharted dreams, so little connected with the wooer at her side that she positively started at the discovery that the music had faded, that his arms had crept around her—

In another second, his lips would have been claiming the nectar of her own. But a little interruption occurred. A few words, spoken from the door of the rancheria, in the quiet voice of Señora Valdivia, brought Señor Miguel very suddenly to his feet.

Cynthia peered toward the tall Nicaraguan woman, standing rigidly in the faintly lighted doorway. Her face, once undoubtedly beautiful, showed the premature aging so common to southern races, and her expression had its usual veil of sadness.

"She seems in distress," murmured Cynthia, in quick sympathy. Though understanding Spanish fairly well, she had not caught the woman's rapidly spoken call. Yet her perturbation was so evident, that the girl asked impulsively, "Señora, if I can help you in anything—"

Miguel Cienfuegos checked her sharply.

"Not necessary!" he said, in repressed anger at the untimely breaking in. "She is alarmed lest Felipe has a fever. The fear is most likely unfounded—"

He followed the housekeeper in, to investigate; leaving Cynthia uneasily conscious that she felt more relief at his going than regret at having their betrothal kiss postponed. Her disconcerting mood went even further. Some instinct within was positively urging her to flee before this man who had the rights of a sweetheart should come back to claim them!

The girl had taken only a few steps when a stocky little figure came toward her through the darkness that fringed the block of moonlight in which she stood. And she recognized Lemuel, the ebony despot of the rancho cook house.

"Miss Cynthy?"

"Yes. But why the mysterious whisper?"

"I'se bringin' a secret message. Yo' schoolmate will be waitin' at the same place t'-morrer aft'noon, wif info'mation of 'portance. An' effen you'll 'scuse the liberty, Ah'd like to add a li'l' warnin'. I seen that Valdivia woman look at you mean." He bent closer, finishing earnestly, "Ah don't trust her Miss Cynthy—not nohow!"

Cynthia smothered a smile, and humored the old colored man by answering gravely, "I'll bear your remarks in mind." But she thought, as she went indoors, a little later, "The señora probably criticized his work in the kitchen, and made him sore. He's just trying to get even."

Miguel Cienfuegos stepped up to the girl before she reached her room.

"How is the boy?" she asked.

"Perfectly well. The señora herself is in need of a change. To-morrow is a feast day, and the vaqueros will celebrate. But on the day after, an escort will take her and Felipe to some town in Texas where he can be put at school. We, too, will ride forth, and when we return, sweet white flower, it will be our wedding night!"

The glow of possession was already in his face as he smothered her soft hands in fervent kisses, and as she managed to break away from him, he murmured in a tone that chilled her, "You will learn to be less shy!"

Cynthia's heart was still thumping, as she tossed about in her bed. With marriage to Miguel suddenly made so imminent, she shudderingly realized that her impetuous promise had been the ghastliest of mistakes.

"But I've given my word. I can't go back on it, no matter how bitterly I have to pay!"

Blindly, before she had grasped the meaning of real love, she had stepped into a trap—and the doors were closing upon her.

Trouble followed her into her dreams. She saw herself at the arroyo again. Saw Nick Sheldon leap toward that charging steer, to fail and be pitilessly gored. . . .

Bathed in cold moisture, Cynthia jerked upright in bed. And almost instantly her imaginary terrors gave way to a more substantial fear. Someone was moving in the far corner of her room!

"Who's there?" she asked sharply.

A voice answered, soothingly, "Only Señora Valdivia."

Old Lemuel's warning sprang into Cynthia's mind.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, in Spanish.

"The señorita cried out, and I feared she was in pain," the voice replied gently. "I came to offer help."

Cynthia's very ears burned with shame for her suspicions.

"Forgive me," she said. "I was startled, in waking from a nightmare. You are always the soul of kindness—"

"I am thankful all is well. *Hasta mañana*—"

Noiselessly, the Nicaraguan slipped back into the adjoining room, which was her bedchamber. But it happened that she was again offering help to her son's teacher the following day, after the siesta period. For Cynthia, dressing for her meeting with Nick Sheldon, had been unable to find the belt she usually wore with her riding skirt.

After both women had searched fruitlessly for the woven silken band with its buckle of carved pearl, Cynthia accepted the loan of a less decorative girdle that was the property of the señora. And if one were to judge from the appreciative smile in Nick's eyes, as she rode up to him, some time later, the borrowed belt seemed hardly to have detracted from the general charm of her appearance.

"Scared stiff you wouldn't come," admitted Nick. "Mighty glad you showed up early."

"I've been free all day. The vaqueros are having races and games, because it's a feast day. And my pupil begged off, to take in the fun." She turned Pal loose to graze beside Nick's mustang, and they seated themselves on a time-smoothed boulder.

"My eyes will be agreein' that it's a feast day," he said, smiling happily down upon her.

"H'm-m. Was that the important message I was to come for?"

He sobered quickly. "No. I've bad news for you. That is, bad if you really love this Cienfuegos. Do you, Cynthia?"

"Isn't that a rather personal question?"

"Not any more personal than my interest in the answer!"

Her color rose.

"The only thing that matters," she said, slowly, "is that I have pledged my word to marry him."

"If you love him," said Nick, "you'll go straight to that hombre an' betray all I'm aimin' to tell you. If you don't, you'll be loyal to—Texas. Either way, I'm taking a chance on your action, rather'n see you run headlong into misery."

"Maybe I'd better ask a few questions, too. Why are you snooping on Señor Miguel's land, if you're working for the Lucky 'Leven outfit? And how does it happen that our Box-Circle-Box cook brings your messages?"

"I've known Lem fer years. He drove chuck fer my dad, when he was herd boss, makin' reg'lar trips with cattle on the Chisholm Trail. Lem drifted in here to help in last fall's beef round-up. And by this spring he was just about sure as how things were bein' run crooked, and passed the word on to me. That's how come I breezed out here to borrow a line camp from where I could easy ride into Pitted Canyons and read sign."

"Then you're not actually a cowhand?"

"Put in six years at it."

"But now?"

"I'm a gov'ment range detective, specializin' on brands. An' ready, *muy pronto,* to tell you why Cienfuegos finds 'Box-Circle-Box' a handy brand. And also why the 'box' is shaped oblong."

Dropping forward upon one knee, he used his knife to sketch a capital "L" and followed it by the two straight lines that make the figure eleven.

"The Lucky 'Leven brand," he announced. "Now watch—"

From the top of the "L," extending to the right, he drew a line parallel to, and the same length as, the base of the letter. A stroke connecting the open ends changed the outline into an oblong. A similar service was performed for the number 11 by connecting the "ones" both at top and bottom. Then he drew a ring between the rectangles, and the brand had become Box-Circle-Box.

"Reversed Crescent was even easier to alter. Artist Miguel simply finished out the missing quarter-circle, and added a 'box,' 'fore 'n' after, with his running iron. Hiding behind an old gnarled, stunted juniper, I risked death to peep through the thick stems and watch him do it! For calves and mavericks, he used his own set brand, with a wet buckskin strip between the hide and the hot iron, to give the brand the look of bein' old."

Speechless, Cynthia looked steadily at the marks he had dug into the dirt, as he continued, "I happened to be here, when you were in trouble—I had just cut out a cow, and turned it over to a coupla Reversed Crescent men. They killed it, and stripped off the hide." He called his mustang, and drew a folded object from beneath his saddle. After showing the señor's brand on the upper surface, he turned the inner side toward her. The original reversed crescent was all that the underside showed!

"With that proof," said Cynthia, "I can't doubt he's dishonest!"

"And worse. His hired outlaws stand ready to kill any strange riders with enough backbone to ride into their lair to reclaim straying property."

"It dazes me— I've been walking, blindfold, on the edge of a precipice."

"That's why I had to risk telling you, before it was too late."

"You took an awful chance—for if I hadn't believed, and had told Miguel, his vaqueros would have finished you."

"If you could have called me a liar, and sided with the greaser—well, I don't reckon in that case my life would 'a' meant much. Seems like you've lived right here, and here"—he touched his breast and temple—"ever since that steer brought us together again. Won't you let me take you with me to Lucky 'Leven Ranch? The owner has a motherly old aunt—"

"Thanks, no. I'm going home now to pack my belongings, in secret. Tomorrow, when the señora and her son are ready to leave, I'll break my engagement, and at the last minute I'll go with them. And I won't let Miguel stop me." She arose.

"As soon as you've gone, I'll swoop down on his band with the posse I've been forming. And I don't reckon I need to tell you how I'm aimin' to follow after you, when my job here is done."

His hands, circling her elbows, sent her blood racing hotly. She was beginning to understand now, the new yearnings that Miguel's music had aroused, after Nick Sheldon had come

back into her life. And his promise to pursue her sent a tingling delight along every nerve.

It was almost in silence that they rode toward the rancheria, till, from a heavily wooded slope, they caught sight of the Mexicans, making merry in the valley below.

"They're having a rooster-pull!" exclaimed Nick, in disgust.

The girl's eyes filled with tears at sight of the victimized fowl. It had been packed into the earth so that only a swaying neck and straining head were visible, and its tortured squawks made her blood run cold.

Now a vaquero, riding superbly, was flinging himself sidewise from the saddle and clutching at that outstretched but illusive neck.

"If he had managed to wrench off the bird's head, the ruffian would have been given the prize for his supper," snorted Nick. "No white man would call that sport! And look—the great señor himself is evidently offerin' to show his men how the trick should be done!"

The girl felt a sense of nausea. But for the man at her side, she might have given herself to the cruel fiend now galloping ruthlessly to deal the final stroke of agony to that helplessly imprisoned fowl.

"Keep out of sight, whatever happens," advised Nick, hurriedly spurring forward. "This is more than I can stand!"

So it happened that when the ranchero made the perilous lunge necessary for snatching the rooster's head off, he found it straddled by a tall, threatening form. He lost his balance and rolled ignominiously upon the ground.

By the time he had picked up his jarred frame, the interloper had swiftly liberated the long-suffering captive.

"You might have killed me!" roared the wealthy Mexican.

"You might 'a' killed the rooster," drawled Nick, in contempt. "I'm damned if that loss wouldn't 'a' been greater!"

Cynthia saw the fowl's deliverer step back warily, before she realized that Miguel had jerked his knife out. Her heart gave a painful twist as the steel flew toward Nick Sheldon, but he sidestepped it as deftly as he might have dodged a menacing horn. To her joy, she saw that his mustang had sagaciously come to Nick's side.

Mounting, the range detective covered his retreat with a firmly gripped weapon and disappeared into the wood in a direction that would not expose her whereabouts, if the Mexicans attempted to trail him. Which is exactly what the vaqueros seemed intending to do, when, to Cynthia's surprise, their boss stopped them. And what he said to them was quite understandable to her, although spoken in Spansih.

"I feel sure," said Señor Cienfuegos, "that this hombre is a spy. The same one we caught a glimpse of, 'riding line' on the Lucky 'Leven border. We will not trail and kill him now. I have thought of a better scheme!" His swarthy face glowed with an evil satisfaction. "We will ride out through Pitted Canyons, soon after daylight, and surround his cabin. He shall be buried up to the neck, just as was the rooster whose plight so moved him. . . . And we will choose for him a spot near an anthill!"

Cynthia, never before so affected, nearly fell fainting from her horse. But she goaded herself back to alertness, at the thought of Nick Sheldon's hideous danger. If it took her last breath, she must get a warning to him, somehow.

It was with a throb of quickening hope that she remembered Nick's ally in Miguel's hostile camp—old Lemuel. He would take word for her.

The Mexicans lingered to make plans for the contemplated sortie. That gave Cynthia a chance to move quietly through the wood to a point where she could see the Mexicans closely, at the same time half hidden herself by the foliage. She recognized Lemuel, by himself, picking up firewood be-

tween her and the others. She whistled low, once, and he came toward her. After listening intently to her hasty explanation, he assured her that she need have no further anxiety.

"Dis ol' biscuit-shooter ain't bow-legged fer nothin', missy. I sure can ride some. Soon's I kin figger a way to git outa here, I'll go 'round de long horseshoe edge of de canyons, and git to Massa Nick in plenty time."

Happy at having found a way to thwart Miguel's villainy, Cynthia washed up and went in to supper, just as her employer came in. Señora Valdivia, who had grown steadily more depressed as the time for her going drew nearer, seemed somber to the point of being sullen. Her son, weary from the day of unusual excitement, almost fell asleep at the table.

At intervals, Miguel's dark eyes flashed toward Cynthia, an almost gloating reminder that before the next day closed she would at last belong to him. And she dropped her lids over the hatred that might betray how she felt, now that his real vileness had been exposed. The man's smooth veneer held deceit for her no longer.

By the measure of the very different sensations that had wakened to the coming of Nick Sheldon, she knew that her heart had never been even the least bit involved, when she lightly accepted Miguel.

Cynthia was rejoicing over the fact that old Lemuel's services had been available, when circumstances dealt a stunning blow. There was a commotion from the direction of the cook shack—followed by bad news. The cook had slipped on some carelessly dropped peelings, and seemed to have seriously injured his leg. Screaming and groaning, he was insisting on being taken to a doctor reputed to be a visitor at a cow camp ten miles to the north.

Not one of the sport-fagged vaqueros was willing to go with Lem. But two were finally pressed into service. Praying and cursing, the old colored man almost lay upon his horse, his injured leg eased by a shortened stirrup, his grumbling bodyguards already half asleep in their saddles.

With drawn face, Cynthia watched them go; then she went indoors, sick with galling disappointment. She was sorry for Lem. It was not his fault that this agonizing accident had come to make his journey of warning impossible.

"But the thing's got to be done just the same," the girl told herself staunchly. "I'll go to Nick myself—across the canyons!"

The mere thought made her shiver, almost weaken. There were dangerous lurkers in Pitted Canyons. Even with the help of her small pocket compass, she might easily lose her way in the twisting pathway she would have to pick out through its maze of grotesque gullies and pitted rock walls. But, whatever the peril or cost to herself, it was better than the horror of lying inactive while the hour of Nick's doom kept creeping closer and closer.

Long before daybreak, Cynthia Carman was safely out of the rancheria's vicinity. Muffled sounds in the next room had worried her, for fear Señnora Valdivia was stirring and might investigate her exit; but luckily there had been no interference.

Sly leeches of fear were clinging to Cynthia's heart as she left all traces of trail behind her and plunged into the uncertainties of the canyon.

"The way around the edge would have been safer," she thought ruefully, "but it is so long that I'd have petered out hours before I reached Nick's cabin."

Plodding on, she bolstered her courage with the memory of Nick's. How daring he had been to ride sign on these badmen, right in their own territory! How cool, to cut out that suspiciously branded cow, on Miguel's own property. . . . And what iron nerve it had taken to stride down to liberate that poor rooster, with odds at least thirty to one against him!

"Oh, Pal, we've just go to save him," she whispered, "because now, it's really love, Pal. The most gorgeously marvelous— Good grief, what was that?"

Her pony was stepping gingerly along a narrow ledge that, with many hairpin turns, was taking them into a still invisible valley far below. And from an upper portion of the slippery way by which they had just descended, a tiny shower of sandy earth had sprinkled down upon the girl's hands.

Could anyone be following her? At thought of the ruffians who haunted this ghoulish region, the girl's breathing became hurried.

"It's just—imagination—of course—that makes me think I'm hearing hoofs, up there," she muttered through fear-frozen lips.

The darkness was fading now. The air was a mystic gray.

Cynthia quivered uneasily.

"If there really is someone above, he can peer over the edge, and get a look at me in this light— Oh . . . oh . . . oh!"

There had never been a greater excuse for an outburst of fright and bafflement. For in the space of a few seconds the girl found herself imprisoned by a noose deftly flung from above, and lifted high enough to free her pony's back so that he moved on from under her.

Apparently, the open end of the lariat was fastened about a jutting boulder. The hoofbeats were continuing. Her captor was coming down to claim his dangling quarry . . . was making the turn. . . . A blurred outline advanced, while the girl's spine seemed turning to ice, so great was her fright.

Cynthia Carman had never been so dumbfounded in all her life as when she recognized Señora Valdivia, and saw her dismount, frowning grimly.

"You are not the only one," the newcomer remarked in smooth Spanish, "whom the clever Señor Miguel instructed in the arts of the reata. Only I was a quicker pupil!"

Swiftly, while she spoke, she had bound Cynthia's ankles with another rope she carried. After tying the girl's wrists, she cut the noose from which Cynthia had dangled, and, balancing her trussed body over Pal's back, led him into the valley, while her own horse followed.

"What are you trying to do to me—how dare you? Lem warned me you were not to be trusted, but—"

"You came like a snake in the grass, to poison my peace. You shall taste your own medicine!"

It was light enough now to see the dawn mists beginning to rise, to distinguish between the mesquite, greasewood and brush.

"You've gone crazy!" Cynthia writhed angrily in her comfortless position. "I've never injured you."

Halting, the señora effectually gagged the girl with her own neckerchief. Twenty minutes later, after mounting a series of terraces, they entered a semi-circular rock chamber, that was like a big, roofless cave with a narrow entrance.

Close to the curving wall, the gaunt señora tossed Cynthia upon the sand, and barricaded her inside of it with stones, so that rolling out of the enclosure would be impossible. Then she began speaking, her eyes holding the girl's with vengeful intensity.

"Years ago, Miguel Cienfuegos lured me from my father's lovely home, by false promises of marriage. In his hands I was powerless, because I loved him. I followed, where he led. My Felipe is his son. Because of that, he insisted he must be educated. You were sent for, and were lied to, about my position here. . . . And, in a short time, you had won him away from me.

"That night, when I saw his arms about you, in the patio, my bursting heart sent a phrase of reproach to bring him back to me. But in his rage, when he came in, he only made it clear that the boy and I must go—that he was through with us.

"You woke, night before last, to find me in your chamber. I was stealing the belt you were searching for yester-

day!" She indulged for several seconds in harsh, mirthless laughter that struck horror to the depths of Cynthia's soul. Surely the Nicaraguan had gone mad—crazed by bitter pondering over the collapse of all her love dreams, and the discovery that her idol was an ungrateful scoundrel!

Now the señora untied her saddle thongs and held up a cylindrical cannister wound about by strips of rawhide.

"Your belt is in here," she said calmly. "And, also, a pretty Sonoran coral snake that I trapped when he was torpid, only last night! When I shake the can, the buckle of pearl strikes and bruises him. He learns to hate the very scent of you. Never fear, he will take his revenge, just as soon as he finds himself released—"

She placed the metal container upon the sand, ten feet from the girl, and cut the rawhide cords. But she was evidently not yet ready to remove the cover, which had been perforated to admit air. Instead, she led the two ponies out to safer positions.

Cynthia strained her tongue against her gag. If only she could tell this strange, jealous creature that she had never dreamed of being her rival; that her acceptance of Miguel had been a stupid mistake; that she had started out, that very morning, to desert him for a man whom she really loved and wanted. . . .

The señora returned. Her stolidity had vanished, and her hands and mouth were working spasmodically as she snapped, "It was my plan to slip the coral snake in your bed, before daylight. I heard you rise, and go out. Perhaps your guilty soul was warning you that punishment was near! I would not be cheated. I followed you, señorita!"

Again, the woman laughed. And now she half loosened the cylinder's round cover, before backing hastily to the door-like exit. Pausing there, she flung up her head triumphantly, as she added, "This is my answer to Miguel's treachery! In a few weeks, when he comes again to dig up the branding irons that lie hidden in the sand beneath where you lie, he will learn what it cost you to rob me."

Cynthia listened intently till the last thudding hoofbeat was gone. And all the while, her eyes were fastened upon that grim object that held her imminent doom.

"As soon as the sun reaches and warms the metal box, the reptile will get livelier. It will push off the cover, and recognize the hostile scent made familiar to the venomous creature by means of the belt put in there to irritate and anger him—"

Terrible as the thought was, there was another, even more harrowing to the girl who had come to love stalwart Nick Sheldon with a burning devotion. This disaster to herself must automatically seal his doom, also. It was impossible, now, to bring him the warning against Miguel's scheme to bury him where his end must come in a way so unthinkably ruthless.

The sun's glow flushed the heavens, and the watching girl shuddered. In a little while, Miguel's ruffians would undoubtedly be swarming through, not far from this niche. . . . In a little while the first warmth of the morning rays would be creeping over the rock rim opposite where she lay. Soon the beams would caress the cannister with warm fingers. Its enlivened occupant would stir, to discover that he was no longer actually a prisoner. And then—

A somewhat distant sound arrested the girl's attention. A band of horsemen—Miguel's brutes, on their errand of destruction. Oh, how maddening it was to have to lie here, bound and futile, when every fibre of her being ached with the longing to be of use to the brave man she loved!

Ah, now they were firing! Pursuing Nick, perhaps.

"Better for him to fall beneath their bullets, than be captured alive," she said pitifully to herself.

Her ears strained to catch every

sound of the far-off battle, until silence suddenly reigned again.

Cynthia's painful conjectures as to what was transpiring were suddenly arrested. With a sickening jolt, her mind was wrenched back to her own immediate plight. The cover of the cannister had just dropped forward, through pressure from within!

The base of the cylinder faced her. With riveted attention, she saw it roll a little from side to side.

Rousing herself to fight against the lethargy of fear, the girl struggled to push a way through or over the rock border that hemmed her in. But it was a useless effort. Utterly crushed in spirit, she gave herself up to black despair.

Cynthia's throat contracted as the snake's ugly head at last protruded, with fangs darting. Now its whole length was exposed, the coral-red circles that banded it uncannily vivid. It halted, its venomous head high and swaying. Then it slowly moved toward her. . . .

Now that her breaths were numbered, the girl steeled herself to courage. If Nick were not already dead, he soon would be. The sting of the approaching creature could do her no real harm—only free her to meet Nick where happiness waited. She would focus her thoughts on him steadily—

It was marvelous. Why, he seemed actually to have materialized before her! She could hear him cry out, "Cynthia darling," as she dropped into the unconsciousness of sheer exhaustion.

When Cynthia's lids finally lifted, she found herself unfettered, and gazing up into greatly worried brown eyes.

"You, Nick? Is this heaven?"

The strong arms about her tightened, and joy sprang full-bloom into his enthralled gaze.

"I reckon it's our Paradise, honey. Yours and mine, with the old serpent shattered! I shot him, a bare second after you fainted."

Growing stronger, she told him of the señora's violent desire to retaliate for her wrongs. Then she recounted Miguel's threat. "And when I heard Lemuel was hurt, I started to bring you the warning myself—" she explained.

"You're the finest girl on earth. But, honey, that injury of old Lem's was just a clever ruse to get off the rancho. As soon as it was possible, he gave those two weary vaqueros the slip, straightened himself out, and rode his nag into a lather! When Miguel sneaked out awhile ago to the attack, my posse and I were hidden behind those gnarled, stunted junipers that dot the hillsides. Maybe you heard the firin'? We ambushed and captured 'em! My men are herdin' 'em toward the cow camp jail. I'll see that they take that Valdivia devil too, and make provisions for her boy."

"It's all like some miracle, and the biggest is how you happened to get here in the very nick of time to save me!"

"Soon as we had the Mexicans taken and started to the calaboose, I made a bee line for this hole, account of havin' spied on Miguel, hidin' his irons and strip of buckskin beneath the sand in this spot. Planned to dig 'em up fer evidence."

Cynthia was on her feet now. Still a little dazed, perhaps.

"Havin' saved your life twice," he grinned audaciously, "I reckon it's just got to belong to me, hon'." His lips came closer.

She drew back saucily, sweet eyes fairly scintillating enticement.

"When I accepted Miguel, I only allowed him to kiss my hand—"

"Huh! That's good news, but don't 'stablish any precedent fer this case! Love is out for a round-up, with one happy herder to ride circle on your kisses—"

Cynthia accepted the services freely proffered by Love's one-man outfit, and evidently found no flaws in its efficiency!

Cactus Trail

By Victor Rousseau

PART FOUR

RIDING into Mexico to arrest one Gomez, who had murdered his buddy, Dave Hatton of the Rangers rescued a girl from a gang who were holding up a stage. She was Dolores Keefe, whose father, Tom Keefe, the famous Indian-fighter, had settled in Mexico and married the heiress to a vast rancheria. Dolores told Dave that she was on her way to appeal to her cousin, Ramon Gonzalez, the governor of Magdalena, for help.

James Burton, head of a gold mining syndicate, had a mortgage on the rancheria, and had put in a manager named Ackers, who was robbing the girl. They were secretly supporting the bandit leader, Truxillo, who was in search of buried treasure on the ranch. This treasure's existence was supposed to be known to the Yaqui Indians.

Dave and Dolores were warmly welcomed by Gonzalez in Magdalena, and Dave escorted Dolores back to the hacienda, where he found Ackers in possession and entertaining Truxillo. After a gunfight Truxillo escaped, and Dolores regained possession of the rancheria with the aid of her peons.

James Burton came to see Dolores and demanded that Ackers be reinstated. Dolores was forced to comply.

Dave, riding out to look for strays, was fired on from a neighboring hill. He rushed it, and found his attacker, a man named Sims, who formerly worked under Ackers, dead, his body pierced by a score of Yaqui arrows. But of the Yaquis there was no trace.

Gonzalez led his army against Truxillo, and made the hacienda his temporary headquarters. Madero, captain of a troop of rurales brought there to protect Dolores, warned Dave that Gonzalez had sold out to Truxillo. Gonzalez, leaving for the battle front as the acknowledged fiancé of Dolores, challenged Dave to accept a command under him.

Dave quarreled with Dolores and joined Gonzalez, who assigned him the command of a position. Dave's men treacherously abandoned him, and, after holding out alone till his ammunition was gone, Dave rode back to warn Dolores of Gonzalez' treachery.

He found Dolores and Madero prisoners of the rurales, and freed them. The three were then forced to seek refuge in a stone fortress in the rear of the hacienda.

CHAPTER XVI

A Pail of Water

A FEW moments' respite followed; then there came the thudding of feet upon the stairs outside, and a succession of furious blows against the door, mingled with the yells of their assailants. There followed the dulled sound of revolver firing, and bullets pinged into the door. But the stout, weather-aged oak did not yield in the least.

There followed a volley of curses and filthy taunts, while another simultaneous demonstration against the stone walls from without showed that the vaqueros and *rurales* had gathered all their forces.

Dave stepped to one of the loopholes in the walls and fired quickly at a shadow that flitted past in the night. A howl and a curse showed that he had scored a hit, and a furious volley pattered like hail against the stones. Dave and Madero fired briskly, but it was impossible to see anything except the distant flashes of their assailants' weapons.

While Madero continued this counter-demonstration, Dave stepped to the door and discharged his revolver at random through one of the slits. Jeers and curses answered him, but the quick scurrying of feet that followed showed that the stairs and passage outside were no longer safe ground for the attackers.

The situation was one of temporary stalemate, though the same volleying against the walls kept up for some minutes longer. Once a bullet, entering a loophole, sent a chip of stone flying past Dave's head. Turning, he saw Dolores standing close behind him. For the moment he was afraid that she had been wounded.

"Lie down!" he ordered her, indicating one of the cots of the *rurales*, beside which old Rosa Maria was already crouching, the while she prayed volubly to the saints for aid.

And he tried to take the girl by the hand and lead her to a safer place. But she turned from him so disdainfully that Dave's hand fell to his side. Dolores made as if to obey his order, but it was quite evident that she considered herself there under protest, and that Dave had aroused a resentment stronger even than that occasioned by her imprisonment.

At loopholes in the walls, Dave and Madero waited for some target to present itself, but none appeared, and the cries of their attackers had been succeeded by utter silence. It was al-

most dark outside and it was now completely dark within. Dave struck a match, shielding the flame with his hand, and looked about him.

The interior of the stone fort was even larger than he had remembered it as being. The cots of the *rurales* stood side by side against a wall. There were cartons of rifle ammunition, but the rifles were gone. On a shelf were a few supplies. But there was no water. That fact would make it unnecessary for the enemy to prepare for a prolonged siege.

Besides, even if he could procure water from the kitchen above, it would only delay the time of surrender. The situation was as hopeless as it could be.

Men were moving in the hacienda. Dave could hear their footsteps on the stairs. The thick walls and floor, however, shut off all sound of voices.

Dave was debating about what to do when of a sudden he was hailed in English from some point outside. He recognized the voice of Ackers.

"Dave Hatton!" called the manager. "Dave Hatton! I want to talk to you. Can I come up to the wall?"

"Yeah, if you want a dose of lead, you skunk," Dave called back.

Dolores was at Dave's side. "I insist that he shall speak!" she said in a low voice, vibrant with indignation. "Do you hear me? I've got something to say to him!" And she called to Ackers, "I'll listen to you. And then you'll listen to me. You can come forward." She spoke rapidly to Madero in Spanish, and the lieutenant put down his revolver.

In another minute Ackers' voice was heard close outside, but muffled. It was evident that the manager was keeping as close to the wall as possible for fear of stopping a bullet.

"What I want to say is this, Miss Keefe," he began. "You got me wrong again, like the last time. Your vaqueros heard Gonzalez had been beaten, and they went over to Truxillo like they did before. They went crazy on *mescal* and *aguardiente*, and they'd have burned down and sacked the hacienda. Heaven knows where you would have been, if I hadn't stood in with them well enough to turn their ideas to looting the peons' village. So they ran amuck there."

"The village?" gasped Dolores. "Have they harmed any of the people there? I tell you I'd rather they had burned down the hacienda than have my people hurt. The brutes!"

"Just a moment, Miss Keefe," continued Ackers in an ingratiating purr. "It's me who saved this place and you. It's me who persuaded them to keep you a prisoner till Truxillo comes. I told them he was on his way here, and it would be a bad day for them if a hair of your head was harmed. And it was me saved Madero and those three other *rurales* who stayed with him.

"Then this Dave Hatton comes butting in like he did before. No chance to explain. He held us up and freed Madero and those three men I'd done my best to save, and of course, when your vaqueros came back from the village, crazy drunk, they started shooting indiscriminately. And you've got Dave Hatton to thank for that.

"You come out up the stairs, Miss Keefe, you and the housekeeper, and I'll guarantee not a hair of your head will be harmed. And Hatton and Madero can stay where they are till General Gonzalez comes and deals with them."

Dave knew that the girl was shaken by Ackers' smooth speech. If only she could believe Gonzalez had sold her out—but she'd never believe that. Dave could do nothing.

"I will stay here," answered Dolores. "When my cousin arrives, I'll talk with him. I trust him, but I don't trust you."

"I tell you you'll be sorry," snarled the manager. "I've done my best for you, and the men are crazy mad. I'll—"

"Time's up, Ackers," called Dave.

"Vamoose before you get salivated."

He fired a shot at random through the loophole, and Ackers fled with a parting snarl of defiance. Dave turned to Dolores.

"I'm willin' to do whatever you think best," he said. "I came back to tell you the truth. There wasn't nothin' else that I could do. You spoke of waitin' for General Gonzalez to arrive, and you'll find out too late that he betrayed his country."

"Be silent!" cried Dolores peremptorily. "I will not listen to such insults. If Ramon has been unfortunate, that is all the more reason why I, his kinswoman, should stand by him."

"*Ay de mi,* I thirst!" wept Rosa Maria, as she kneeled beside the bed, her heavy body shaken with sobs. "*Agua! Agua,* for the love of Mary!"

"And what do you propose to do?" cried Dolores. "Stay here till my cousin arrives, and face him like a man with your false charges on your lips, or—what?"

"I'll face him," answered Dave. "But there ain't nothing else to do that I can see. We're safe here for the present, and I guess your cousin will see the vaqueros don't do no harm to his intended wife."

Dolores flinched as if he had struck her. Dave heard the movement, but he could not see the girl's face.

"Listen to me," she said. "I have more means at my disposal than you know of. If you wish to escape, I—I believe it can be contrived."

"I guess you're wrong there, Miss Keefe," said Dave. "There ain't no escape. We're here till Gonzalez comes. And I'll face the music. And I wouldn't go till you're free, anyways. I guess you know that, whatever you think of me."

Dolores was silent. Dave heard her turn away in the darkness. Then he heard a slight sound, a sob, that filled him with consternation. But what was he to do?

"*Agua! Agua!*" moaned Rosa Maria. "Ah, I thirst so, señor. I have the illness that I must drink all the time. I cannot bear it."

Dave stepped to the old woman's side. "I'll try to get you some water," he said. "Madero, you hold the fort. It won't take more than a minute or two to get some water from the kitchen, and they ain't watchin' the stairs."

"Stop!" said Dolores in a strained whisper. She moved toward Dave. "I don't want you to go," she said. "Let her thirst for a while."

"Reckon it won't be hard to bring down a pailful from the kitchen," answered Dave. And, disregarding Dolores' plea, he moved softly to the door and began gently to raise the bars that held it. He stopped and listened. From the bunkhouse came the shouts of the punchers, and it was certain that men were on guard at the entrances. But about the fort all was silent, and there was no sound overhead.

Dave opened the door, peered out, gun in hand, and then very softly began to ascend the stairs.

There was nobody on the stairs, and when he pushed open the door of the great kitchen, and stood peering inside, the place appeared deserted. Nor was there any sign of life within the hacienda, though Dave had no doubt it was under guard. The kitchen did not give directly upon the outside, but looked out, rather, upon a succession of small rooms used for the drying of meat and vegetables and storage purposes. Thus there was no reason to suppose that any guard would have been placed in it.

Dave moved forward. At the farther end of the kitchen was the sink, with two faucets. The water flowed from a tank on the roof, into which it was pumped by a gas engine at the back of the house. Dave was nearing the sink when he knocked over a broom, which fell clattering down.

He froze rigid and peered out into the darkness. But the fall of the broom seemed not to have been heard,

and Dave moved on again. He groped his way toward the sink, until his toe encountered something that rattled slightly. He stooped, and found a pail.

He placed it in the sink and, turning a tap, let the water flow into it, tilting the pail slightly so that it should make the minimum of noise. When the pail was nearly full, Dave turned off the faucet. He was about to remove the pail from the sink when a stunning shock passed through his brain, and the faint glimmer of light inside the kitchen vanished in total darkness.

He tried to cry out, to give the alarm to those below to bolt the door, but already his senses were leaving him. Only a second had passed since the blow had descended, and he felt himself reeling. He heard the pail clatter against the sink as his nerveless hands released it. Then everything faded out of consciousness. He had been struck from behind.

In the fort below, the three waited close beside the door, listening to each sound through the tiny crevice. They heard Dave groping his way across the kitchen, then the fall of the broom, followed by the sound of running water.

There was a look on Dolores' face that strangely belied her hostile manner toward Dave, and her hands were clasped as if in prayer. Old Rosa Maria, tortured by the thirst that consumed her, crouched behind the girl, muttering ceaseless prayers and fingering her rosary. They heard the running water cease, then a step, as if Dave had stumbled.

Then they heard heavy footsteps cross the kitchen floor again, and the clink of the pail against the wall beside the stairs, followed by the splash of spilled water, and a muffled oath.

That oath should have put them on their guard. It did not. The footsteps reached the stone outside the door.

"Is it all right, Dave?" whispered Dolores, forgetting her quarrel with him in her eagerness.

She began to open the door slowly. A hand closed over her own, forcing it back. But that was not Dave's hand. The girl screamed as the door was flung wide. The contents of the pail, dashed full into Dolores' face, flung her back on the ground.

A scream from Rosa Maria; a shout from the doorway; answering yells from the stairs! Madero struggling over two prostrate women in the endeavor to fire! The gun was torn from his hand, and a revolver muzzle, descending on his forehead, stretched him prone upon the stone floor.

"Don't hurt the señorita!" shouted Ackers, pushing forward from the rear, and flashing a torch. "Shut up, you old fool, or I'll knock your addled brains out!" he added to Rosa Maria, as her shrieks rent the air. "Yes, we've got Hatton nice and snug upstairs, Miss Keefe," he grinned. "You ought to have known that there's a listening hole in the kitchen floor. And you'd have done better to have taken my advice just now!"

CHAPTER XVII

Sentenced to Death

DAVE stared at the light filtering into the room. He knew that he was lying on a bed, but there was something strange about that bedroom, for it had no windows, only slits in the walls. Moreover, the walls were of stone.

It came upon him with a shock of surprise that he was lying on one of the cots in the fort. That was what startled him into fuller consciousness. He looked about him. He was undeniably in the fort, and yet—

Where were Dolores, Madero, and Rosa Maria? Had it all been a dream, that wild ride of his, the rescue of the girl from the *rurales,* the following fight, the escape to the fort and all the rest?

It was not for a minute longer that Dave was able to remember the

final events, his attempt to bring the old woman a pail of water from the kitchen, and the blow that had stunned him.

Of the reality of that blow Dave had no doubt, for his head ached as if it was going to split open.

But how had it happened that he was back in the fort again, and that the others were gone?

Quickly his mind followed the obvious developments of the situation. They must have rushed the fort before the door could be closed, and must have taken the three others prisoners, if, indeed, Madero had survived. Then he had been placed there in captivity, in sardonic mockery.

He sat up on the cot. He was not bound. It was not necessary to bind him, for there was no way of escape except by the door, and that was doubtless securely barred on the outside.

Dave looked through the loopholes. The sun was on the other side of the house, but from the shortness of the shadows cast, he estimated that it was about noon. He could hear an occasional shout from the direction of the bunkhouse, and once a horse neighed. Once, too, a man passed through the kitchen overhead. Beyond that, all was silence.

Dave did not flatter himself that Gonzalez would show him any mercy. Inevitably his life would pay the forfeit of his defiance, of his escape from the trap upon the battlefield, of his presumption in loving Dolores. And as a matter of simple policy Gonzalez could not afford to let him live, to bear witness to his treachery. But it was the thought of Dolores that made Dave sick at heart—Dolores, coming to the realization of her cousin's perfidy, and in his power.

Where was she? Dave got upon his feet and made his way to the door. He tried it, but of course it was fastened. He stood beside the door, searching in his mind for some possible course of action, when he heard footsteps and voices in some part of the ranch house, apparently coming from the main living room.

For about half an hour the sounds continued; then the door at the top of the stone stairs was opened, and Dave heard footsteps descending. The bars behind the fortress door were raised, a key turned in the lock, and two men in uniform appeared. Dave saw at a glance that they were not members of the troop of *rurales*, but petty officers of the Federal Army.

"Eh, gringo, the head—how does it feel now?" asked one of them, grinning. "*El General* sends for you. Your troubles will soon be over, gringo." He drew his finger expressively across his throat.

The second soldier signed to Dave peremptorily to precede him out of the room. Dave obeyed. He was trying to take it all in. So Gonzalez was back! Dave was voicing a prayer that he might not be a witness of Dolores' grief when she discovered the truth. He shambled stiffly up the stairs, where his guards took their position one on either side of him, revolvers in their hands.

As they entered the central hall, three figures came out of the patio. The one in the middle was Madero, the two others were guards. Madero's face was white, and there was a bloody gash across one cheek, as if the flesh had been ripped away by a bullet. He raised his eyes to Dave and made some gesture which Dave did not understand, then passed on.

The guards conducted Dave across the patio, not into the main living room, but into a smaller one that led off it. Dave first saw Gonzalez seated at a table, with three other officers. There was a mass of papers upon the table. Federal soldiers, with bayonets affixed to their rifles, stood behind the group.

"Halt!" shouted one of Dave's guards, as they reached the opposite side of the table. "Salute the general!"

Dave stood up straight, ignoring Gonzalez. One of the guards seized his arm and attempted to bring his hand up to the salute, but the attempt was not very successful.

"After all," sneered one of the officers, who wore the uniform of a colonel, "one must not expect good manners of a pig of a gringo."

"I do not salute traitors," answered Dave, and Gonzalez' face grew flaming red. He raised his hand, checking the outcries of the officers.

"No, one does not expect or ask for manners from gringo rascals," he said, and addressed Dave.

"You are charged," he said, "with an act of cowardice in having abandoned the post committed to you in the late battle, the punishment for which, under the Military Code, is death. How do you plead?"

Dave looked at him contemptuously, but said nothing. The man's effrontery was amazing. Gonzalez evidently meant to put him to death in full accordance with military law, thereby exonerating himself from the consequences. But where was Dolores?

"Enter a plea of 'not guilty,'" Gonzalez instructed a sergeant clerk whom Dave now perceived scribbling at a small table behind the officers. "Now, Colonel Diaz, please proceed."

And Dave, hardly yet taking in the fact that he was being tried by court-martial for his life, stood between his guards listening to the amazing speech of the prosecutor.

Waving his arms dramatically, punctuating his words with gestures of extreme violence, the prosecution recounted how Dave, an American honored with a command in the Federal Army, and placed in charge of one of the key positions, had shamefully abandoned it. Thereby he had permitted the enemy to pierce the Federal lines and to force a retreat. Only the heroic courage of the patriotic troops had prevented a disgraceful rout.

"There is but one penalty for such an act, whether it was due to treachery or cowardice!" the prosecutor shouted. "I demand it! I demand, in the name of the Mexican people, that the death sentence be inflicted upon this traitor by shooting, within twenty-four hours, according to the provisions of the Code."

With a final flourish of his arms, the colonel dropped in his chair.

"Call Colonel Fayas," said Gonzalez.

An orderly disappeared, and returned, preceded by the dark, undersized Fayas, whose Indian eyes glared hostility at Dave. He saluted Gonzalez.

"Colonel Fayas, will you detail your transactions with the prisoner?" asked Gonzalez.

Dave listened in bewilderment, despite his appreciation of the plot, while Fayas reeled off a tissue of the vilest lies. He had suspected *el capitán* from the first glance at him, he said, but had obeyed his orders to place him in command of the advanced post.

The rebels had attacked at dawn, and *el capitán* had immediately ordered a retreat, flinging the whole force into confusion, so that it was impossible to stay the rout. He, Fayas, had defended his post to the last, with a handful of men, leaving it only when further resistance was impossible, owing to lack of ammunition.

And three more witnesses, ranging in rank from colonel to lieutenant, appeared successively to substantiate Fayas' story. Dave listened with face set in grim lines. He had made up his mind to utter no word in his defense. He realized that by accepting the rank in the Federal Army he had placed himself at Gonzalez' mercy. But again, he wondered, why should the victor in the love suit have gone to such lengths of utter malignity?

Suddenly he realized that Gonzalez was addressing him.

"You have heard the speech of the prosecution, and the witnesses. You have the privilege of replying and of offering witnesses," he said.

"I'll use it," answered Dave. "I don't know whether this here court is as crooked as yourself, or whether they are jest dupes. I ain't goin' to answer such tall lyin' as I've been listenin' to." He stopped as Gonzalez rose, white and shaking, and went on in Spanish, the words flowing from his lips almost without effort.

"You ordered Colonel Fayas to abandon that post while I was asleep, you dirty crook!" he thundered, in tones that drowned Gonzalez' spluttering protests. "You sold out to Truxillo and don't want me to be a witness to it!"

He turned to the court. "That's the truth," he cried, "and if you don't know it yet, you won't be long in finding out!"

Gonzalez flung out his arm to stay the guards, who were about to hurl themselves upon Dave, and turned to the three officers.

"Gentlemen, your verdict?" he asked. "Mine I shall record after you have spoken. You have heard the arraignment—and the answer. Your verdict?"

"Guilty!" cried the three officers in chorus.

"Guilty!" said Gonzalez, smiling softly. "And the sentence?"

"Death! Death to the traitor!"

Gonzalez, leaning across the table, leered devilishly into Dave's face.

"*Capitán* Hatton," he said, "you have been found guilty by this court of treason and cowardice in the face of the enemy. After due consideration of the case, the sentence of this court is that you be placed in confinement until to-morrow morning at sunrise, and then executed by shooting." He looked at the guards. "Remove the prisoner!" he commanded.

Dave, fighting down an immense inclination to dash his fist into Gonzalez' complacent, self-satisfied face, turned away. But before he had time to move a single pace there occurred an unexpected diversion.

For the door that gave upon the patio was flung open, and Dolores appeared upon the threshold, her hair in disorder, her face blanched, while behind her could be seen two guards whom she had evidently in some way managed to elude.

"Ramon, what is this?" she cried, running forward. "You promised me that—"

"That Señor Hatton should have every opportunity to answer the charges against him," retorted Gonzalez blandly, rising to his feet again. "The court has given Señor Hatton his opportunity. He has brought forward no witnesses. He has been found guilty of treason and cowardice—"

"You're mad!" Dolores broke into wild, hysterical laughter. "Dave Hatton a traitor? Dave Hatton a coward? I could as soon believe those charges of yourself, Ramon!"

But suddenly, in the tense silence, the girl seemed to read Dave's doom. She checked herself, then ran forward. "The sentence, Ramon? The sentence?" she cried.

Everybody was so still now that Dave could hear a watch in one of the officers' pockets ticking. Even the guards remained motionless, all eyes fixed on the girl's face.

"You are not going to— You dare not— Is it *that*, Ramon?" cried Dolores in a tone of frenzy. And, reading the answer in the looks of all, she took two more steps forward and caught him by the arm. "Revoke that sentence!" she cried. "You will! You will! He shall not die because—because I refused to become your wife, Ramon!"

Dave stared at the girl as if stupefied. And deep within his heart a little song of pure joy was rising. He didn't care now. He was ready to die if need be. Dolores cared nothing for him, but the old friendship, the old comradeship remained unchanged. His instinct told him that.

"I'd pay the price a thousand times for that," he told himself.

"Señorita, it is not necessary to re-

fer to these matters," rasped out Gonzalez. "At least, in public!"

"I tell you it is a shameful thing, and that these charges are lies!" she cried. "You shall not send him to his death! I warn you—"

"Señorita, if you have anything to say to me, let it be in private," retorted Gonzalez. "Remove the prisoner!"

"Dave!" The girl turned to him, ran toward him. But the guards were hustling Dave away. Three or four of the Federal soldiers stepped hastily between him and Dolores forming an impenetrable barrier.

"Don't worry, Dolores," said Dave, twisting his face into a grin. "It's good enough you know that dog's lyin'."

"Remove him!" bawled Gonzalez, suddenly losing the last vestige of his self-control.

Dave saw Dolores trying to force her way through the soldiers. He tried to signal to her to desist. He couldn't bear to see the spectacle of her grief. For an instant rash plans wove themselves in his brain; then he quickened his footsteps, and in another moment was in the patio.

He heard Dolores' frantic cries behind him, but he let the guards hustle him along. In a moment or two they were descending the stairs and entering the fort. The guards thrust Dave violently forward and slammed the door behind him. He heard the bars fall and the key turned; he was alone with his brooding thoughts.

No, not alone. Seated on a cot before him, and now rising, was Madero.

Madero with the bloody cut upon his cheek, his face just visible in the gloom of the interior. He came forward and clasped Dave's hand.

"What luck, comrade?" he asked.

"A little shootin' party in the mornin'," answered Dave with affected jocularity. "How about you, Madero? You—you ain't—?"

"We shall face that little party side by side like brave men, I trust," answered Madero with equal lightness. "They tried me for permitting my *rurales* to get out of hand. Ah, the dog, he had planned it all! He wishes me out of the way because I have been witness to his treacheries. And you, comrade, what was the charge against you?"

"Cowardice and treason," grinned Dave. He checked the other's vicious expletive. "You can hang any label on a dog that you want to," he said. "It don't change the critter's nature. Reckon Gonzalez has been too slick for you and me. He wins, that's all."

"Holy saints, but the señorita—imagine her as that devil's bride!" cried Madero.

"You're wrong there, Madero. Fact is, she turned him down. Yeah, refused him. Don't ask me how I know it, but I do. That's what's at the bottom of this business. He wants her, and he wants the *rancheria* more. Hell, ain't that a pack of cards them *rurales* left behind? I'll play pinochle with you, Madero. Don't savvy it? It's a swell game. I'll teach you!"

CHAPTER XVIII

Dolores Pleads

IN the swift glances that Ramon Gonzalez cast about him while Dolores was making her impassioned plea, he read a change of sentiment on the part of the officers. There was actually pity in the eyes of the soldiers, who had been impressed by Dave's courage, and had seen the pathos of the girl's appeal.

Were the members of the court-martial traitors, or were they only time-servers? Probably they were men who knew that their interests lay in inquiring as little as possible into circumstances, who wished to know nothing more than the bare facts that were laid before them. But Gonzalez, always alert to a situation, realized that Dolores had won their sympathy.

As soon as Dave had been removed Gonzalez turned to the girl.

"Señorita," he remarked, "I shall be glad to hear anything you may wish to say to me in private."

Offering her his arm, he escorted her from the room into one of the smaller ones that led off the patio. He closed the door and pushed up a chair for her, but she remained standing. Facing him with flashing eyes and heaving bosom, she seemed to him more desirable than ever, and a wave of mingled passion and anger surged up in him.

"You should not have made that scene in the presence of those men," he reproved her.

"I tell you those charges are wicked, preposterous lies," she retorted. "Dave Hatton shall not die. If you dare carry out that sentence—"

Gonzalez raised his hand. "It is not necessary to threaten, Dolores," he answered. "Hatton was convicted after careful consideration of the evidence. The only thing that can save him now is clemency on my part, as presiding officer of the court."

"Call it what you will," cried the girl, breaking into tears. "Only don't execute this monstrous sentence."

"There was a night when I appealed to you for clemency, Dolores," said Gonzalez in a fawning tone. "You refused my plea. You see how it feels now. I loved you from the day I saw you. I hated that *Americano*—"

"Yes, that was at the bottom of it, Ramon," replied Dolores, with renewed spirit. "You hated him because you thought he was your rival. He has never—never—"

But a fresh outburst of sobbing choked her voice. Gonzalez went into action according to the rules as he understood them. He flung himself upon one knee and raised her hands to his lips.

"Dolores—Dolores *mia,* I love you!" he cried. "Why did you reject my suit? Are we not cousins? Is it not right that the two branches of our family should be reunited? That night when I thought you loved me—"

"And you spoke then as you are speaking now, Ramon," answered the girl. "It was always the *rancheria,* our families and the *rancheria.* That was what was in your heart, not love."

"Listen to me, Dolores. Marry me! Swear that you will marry me within three days, and I will let Hatton go free. More than that, I will give him enough money to make his trip to Mexico an exceedingly profitable one."

"You think he would take your money? You think he would go with this stigma of shame that you have placed upon him? It was a trick. I don't know the details, but I know that you conspired his death!" cried Dolores fiercely.

Gonzalez quailed before her wrath. "Suppose that's true?" he cried. "Suppose I wished the man I hated most to be out of my way—what then? It was for you, Dolores. There is no crime I would not commit for you. I want you, Dolores *mia!*"

He knew how to strike the note that would soften her. He saw her weaken, and went on:

"Marry me, Dolores, and he goes free. Ah, you love him! But I do not care for that. You will learn to love me soon enough. Come! His life for mine, Dolores, for I cannot live without you!"

She stared at him through mists of doubt. Until that night on the piazza she had seen her cousin in a romantic dream. Her thoughts about Dave she had put away as treachery to Ramon. Then, when he had talked of the *rancheria,* and hardly anything but the *rancheria,* doubts had arisen in her heart.

She was Tom Keefe's daughter; she had been to an American school; and in America men did not discuss those things when they proposed marriage. She had refused him, giving no reason because she did not know the reason herself.

The next day he had ridden away,

after hurling at Dave the insult which he shrewdly calculated would bring him to the battle front and place him in his power.

She stared at him, trying to understand, perhaps trying to bring back some of the old fascination that he had had for her. But before she could answer him, there came a tapping at the door, and Gonzalez swung around with a muttered oath, strode to it and opened it. An orderly there.

"Pardon, General—" Dolores heard, and then the name, Truxillo.

She blanched, and stumbled forward. "What does he say?" she whispered. "Truxillo—here? Ramon, you must save yourself. I'll hide you till dark. Then I'll bring a horse—"

Gonzalez' face was ghastly as he turned it upon her. "Keep quiet!" he commanded curtly. "You don't know what you're talking about! He has probably come to negotiate. Why, he's alone, and my army is between him and his own forces. Go to your room, Dolores!"

She stood there without answering him, instinct telling her of some fresh terror in store for her. And as she waited she heard the footsteps of a number of men in the patio and a man's boisterous laughter. Then four or five men in uniform appeared in the doorway that led to the inner court, clustering about another who overtopped them by half a head.

He was the most repulsive-looking man Dolores had ever seen. Great rolls of flesh hung about his jowls; his eyes were set deep in wrinkled sockets and were small and greedy as a pig's. His expression was one of bestial ferocity. And Dolores knew, as Dave had known when he first saw him, that this was Truxillo.

There was a pad, bound in place by adhesive, on the man's neck, visible above the uniform, which testified to Dave's shooting ability. The uniform itself was unkempt and wrongly buttoned. In the belt was a heavy automatic.

As Dolores stopped still in terror, Truxillo, sighting her, came to a stop also. His little eyes gleamed at the sight of the girl as he returned Gonzalez' salute.

"Whom have we here, General?" he barked.

"My cousin, General, the Señorita Dolores Keefe," replied Gonzalez.

Off came Truxillo's sombrero with a wide sweep, and his face wrinkled into a score of creases. But Dolores stood stock still with terror, unable to remove her eyes from the face of the bandit leader.

"Present my staff, General," said Truxillo, hiccoughing, and now Dolores could smell the odor of mescal that emanated from him. She tried to return the bows of Truxillo's companions, but faintness was overcoming her. She clutched at the wall; felt herself slipping.

Next moment Truxillo had picked her up in his arms and was carrying her to a lounge in the room, where he laid her down. The touch of the man, his face, his breath revolted her, and she could not restrain a shudder. Truxillo saw it and grinned.

"Your cousin is even more beautiful than she was reputed to be, General," he hiccoughed. A diabolical grin wrinkled his face. "I have come to attend the marriage ceremony, General," he roared. "I have a priest in my train, who should be here by midnight. *Diablo,* I rode far to avoid that beaten army of yours!"

His fat body shook with laughter, and the evil-looking members of the staff laughed too. Dolores lay still on the lounge, her eyes closed, but she was less unconscious than she seemed. She was trying to puzzle out Truxillo's familiarity with Ramon, who must, of course, be playing a part to protect her.

"You should have married her long ago," roared Truxillo, "and then all Sonora would already be mine, and we should be on our victorious way to the City of Mexico. I tell you, you

have muddled things badly, General, and I lost five hundred men in that fight, after you assured me your forces would take to flight immediately."

Dolores sat up on the lounge, her eyes staring, her look like that of an insane woman. So strange was her expression that Truxillo stopped short in the beginning of a new tirade. Gonzalez stepped quickly toward the girl.

"Don't touch me!" She was upon her feet. "It's true then, is it? Tell him he lies! Someone tell me he lied," she pleaded, "when he said that Ramon Gonzalez was a traitor to his country."

Truxillo loosed an oath. "So she knows nothing?" he roared at Gonzalez. "You fool, you've bungled everything!"

Dolores' hand was plucking at Gonzalez' sleeve. "Won't you speak, Ramon?" she pleaded. "Tell him it is not true that you plotted to betray the army, that— Ah, it's true!"

Gonzalez' look was that of a trapped cur, and Truxillo and his staff, not understanding Dolores' attitude toward what seemed to them in no way out of the usual run of things, were silent in amazement. In Mexico one changed sides any number of times, according to the advantages.

Dolores stepped forward, and, with a sudden sweep of her arm, struck Gonzalez across the face with her open palm.

"That is my contempt for you, you traitor!" she cried. "You, the first of our people to sell your country! The loathing that I feel for you will never fade. I never want to see your face again, or think of you. Now, do your worst, you murderer!"

Gonzalez' eyes blazed. He caught at the girl's arm, but one of Truxillo's aids intervened to prevent what would undoubtedly have been a return blow. Truxillo nodded approval. His fat features were creased with satisfaction, and he never took his eyes off Dolores' face.

She stepped forward, hands clasped, trembling, though her voice was firm and steady. "General Truxillo, I am pleading with you, something I never thought that I should do," she said. "I am a rebel—yes, but no traitor, like that man!

"I am pleading for an innocent man's life!" She went on in quick sentences, telling him about Dave, condemned to be shot at sunrise. "He saved my life," she cried, "and I am asking for his!"

Truxillo's hand went out and began fumbling with Dolores' sleeve. He stroked her arm, reached to her shoulder, and patted it. "So you want your lover's life, eh, pretty one?" he asked. "Well, perhaps we shall persuade General Gonzalez to spare him for you."

"General, enough of this!" snarled Gonzalez. "I am going to marry my cousin as soon as the priest arrives, according to the plan. What do women know about political affairs? Dolores, you'll soon get over this folly of yours. What I have done has been done in this country over and over again."

He tried to reach her hand, and she leaped back and confronted him like an animal at bay. Her looks, searching, pleading, defying, passed from one man to the other. And all the while Truxillo looked at her, and smirked, and licked his lips.

Suddenly he turned to Gonzalez. "Have the señorita confined in her room, and place a guard at the door," he said. "We shall discuss this matter when we have dined, General. Come," he roared. "I am tired of this discussion and I have not eaten since morning!"

He motioned to an orderly, who aproached Dolores and touched her on the arm. And the girl, in that moment of despair, used her own arts to plead with Truxillo for Dave's life. Truxillo's smirk grew broader as she glanced at him appealingly, and as she turned and walked quietly away beside her captor, the chief's eyes

watched every movement of her lithe body.

CHAPTER XIX

Truxillo's Coup

IN her room, Dolores listened to each sound that rang through the hacienda. She heard the clatter of hoofs outside, the stamp of feet through the rooms, voices bawling, and judged that Truxillo must have brought a considerable force with him.

Once she heard Truxillo himself shouting, and a thrill of terror ran through her. And as if the four walls of the room had opened to some inner vision, she seemed to see all that transpired, or at least to form a mental picture from the medley of sounds that reached her.

Old Rosa Maria had been impressed into Truxillo's service, and now and again Dolores could hear her bawling at some of the Indian children, in the way she always had. It seemed just as if nothing had happened. And it did not seem possible, indeed, that Dave and Madero were lying in the fort awaiting execution at sunrise.

Dolores had learned the full particulars from the sentry who stood outside the room. But the man had held his bayonet so threateningly when the girl tried to rush past him that she had seen there was no possibility of escape. She had controlled herself, cajoled him, talked to him, until the sound of Ramon's voice somewhere sent her hurrying back. She could never see Ramon again, the traitor!

And gradually, as the hours went by, Dolores grew calm. She began to marshal the facts of the situation in her mind. At first the realization of Ramon's treachery had all but unbalanced her; now she accepted it as a fact and tried to review everything in the light of it.

Even to save Dave's life she did not believe she could have married him, once his treachery was proved. But—there was Truxillo! And he had half promised that the sentence should be revised. Dolores was Latin enough to be willing to use her arts to cajole the bandit leader, for Dave's sake. She knew—she could not help knowing—that she had aroused his interest in her.

It would be playing with fire, but she would do it to save Dave from death.

As the hours passed, the noises within the hacienda grew louder. Truxillo and his men were dining in the enormous room in which former owners of the *rancheria* had dined with their peons at the twenty-foot-long table. Their voices rose, and high above them all Dolores could hear Truxillo's, shouting boisterously. The girl shuddered at the sound of it. She loathed Ramon Gonzalez, but toward Truxillo she felt a physical antipathy, as she might have felt toward some monster.

And yet, when he sent for her, she was prepared to play her rôle—for Dave. Dave whom she loved, whose courage and loyalty had awakened a sudden answer in her when she rejected Ramon's suit. Dave who didn't know and never should know!

A furious outburst of mirth startled her. Instinctively the girl retreated to a far corner of the room, fingers to ears. Instinct told her what that shout of Truxillo's portended. Nor was she wrong. The door opened, and a second guard appeared.

"Señorita, *el general* invites you to permit him to have the honor of your company at the dinner," he said.

If a moment can change one's entire nature, weld the soul into steel, that moment changed Dolores. She shrank no longer; her limbs, which had been trembling, grew still. From some mysterious source, strength seemed to flow into her body. Without a word, she accompanied the guard across the patio and into the great dining hall, with its massive pieces of furniture brought centuries before from Spain.

There must have been nearly a score of men about the table. At the head sat Truxillo; on his right was Gonzalez. The polished surface of the mahogany was covered with plates and dishes and bottles. Great joints of meat had been hacked into shapeless chunks; a bottle had overturned, and its contents were still dripping down on the floor.

Every man there seemed drunk except Ramon Gonzalez, and he was staring in front of him, his face a mask of craft. He was the only one who did not raise his eyes to Dolores as she entered.

"Welcome, welcome here, señorita!" shouted the bandit leader as the girl came forward. He noted how quietly she moved, how icy her demeanor was in contrast with her impassioned violence and fire of an hour or two before. He passed his tongue across his thick lips. A girl of fire and ice—the combination he liked best!

"Sit down beside me, señorita," he bawled, nudging the man on his left, who rose and offered the girl his seat with a bow. "You have not eaten, señorita? A plate for the señorita!" he called.

"I am not hungry, General," replied the girl. And for a fleeting instant she raised her eyes to his. For Dave's sake! And for Dave's sake that ghost of a smile that she alowed to play about her pallid lips.

"Then you shall drink with me!" Truxillo rose and Dolores seated herself. He pushed her chair into place, leaned toward her, ogling her with his little bloodshot eyes. He called for wine, and, when the servant placed the bottle before him, filled the girl's glass, and then his own.

"To the beauty of Mexico, the rose of Sonora!" he cried in tipsy gallantry, raising his glass and tossing off the liquor.

Dolores drank, and again permitted her eyes to meet Truxillo's for an instant. He set his glass down and placed his huge hand, with its black-rimmed nails, over the girl's, imprisoning it.

"And so, pretty one, you ask for the life of the *Americano* lover?" he asked. "*Diablo,* we must see this gringo who has dared to raise his eyes to yours!"

Dolores realized now that Truxillo was unaware that Dave was the man to whom he owed the wound in his throat. Would he insist on seeing him? But perhaps he would not recognize him! Ah! She must go warily!

Truxillo turned to Gonzalez. "Well, General, how about it?" he asked. "Are you willing to present the gringo's life to the señorita for a love gift?"

"And also Lieutenant Madero," interrupted Dolores. "He was sentenced to die, too. And he did nothing, save try to keep his *rurales* loyal." She had learned the facts of Madero's trial from the guard. "General," she went on in impassioned appeal, "you spoke of Señor Hatton as my lover, but no word of love has ever passed between us. Only, he saved my life when the bandits attacked the coach in which I was traveling to Magdalena—"

"*Diablo,* my men!" roared Truxillo. But instantly after he burst into drunken laughter, and, turning to Gonzalez again, clapped him on the shoulder. "So you bungled that business too!" he snarled, with one of his sudden changes. "That letter she sent to you, which you forwarded to me, with instructions as to the time and place—you bungled that affair, eh?"

"But, General," protested Gonzalez, "it was not my fault that this *Americano* appeared on the scene and put your men to flight. Moreover, they were both captured in the end, and only your defeat prevented—"

"Be silent!" thundered Truxillo, growing purple in the face, while his hand moved threateningly toward the automatic at his belt. "My defeat? Dog, if you had joined me a month before you did, Magdalena would be mine at present!"

And again Dolores was conscious of a stunning shock as she realized that Gonzalez' treachery was of long standing—that he had transmitted her letter of appeal to Truxillo, aiming to put her in the bandit's power. For a moment the room seemed to swim around her and the savage, vicious faces of the officers, who were listening attentively to the quarrel, became hazy and dim.

Then, with a violent effort, the girl pulled herself together and smiled into Truxillo's face. Roaring with laughter, he pulled her toward him.

"I grant your plea for the *Americano* and Lieutenant Madero likewise," he shouted. "For since I saw you I have changed my mind. I shall not permit *el general* here to make you his wife and betray me, as he already schemes to do. I shall marry you myself, and control all Sonora!"

And, clutching the girl tightly in his arms, he kissed her.

Ramon Gonzalez sprang to his feet with a wild oath. In that moment he saw all his schemes tumbled into the dust; he bitterly regretted the treachery that had led him to think he could use Truxillo as a tool. All about the table the officers had sprung to their feet likewise, yelling with excitement, their hands at their holsters, ready to shoot Gonzalez down like a dog if he dared to draw.

Yet, in the moment's blind fury, Gonzalez had laid hand to holster too. There seemed to follow a sudden suspension of all movement. Dolores saw, as in one of those nightmares wherein everything remains in suspense—saw the vicious, infuriated faces, and the gleam of gun butts half withdrawn from leather holsters. Only Truxillo remained calm.

Relaxing his hold upon Dolores, the Butcher hunched back in his chair, looking like a leashed wild beast crouching for a spring that would set it free. His hand rested upon the table, but the veins on the back of it stood out in bunches. On his face was a sneering smile. He was the very embodiment of cruelty, of power, of pride.

For an instant longer Gonzalez stood there—then suddenly the tension that held his limbs relaxed. He dropped his hand, turned, and made his way out of the room, groping like a blind man. Titters began among the *muchachos* grouped at the farther end of the table, and were taken up in peals of gusty laughter by Truxillo's officers.

They roared, they howled and shrieked at their leader's exquisite jest, at Gonzalez moving toward the door with shoulders hunched and drooping head. He reached it, laid his fingers on the handle, turned for a moment, and the look upon his face was so ghastly that Dolores felt pity stirring in her heart. And she felt shame, too, that he should be a Gonzalez, that he had not hurled back those taunts in the teeth of those who insulted him, or struck Truxillo across the face.

But in another moment Gonzalez had passed outside, and Truxillo's hand had closed about the girl's again.

"To-night you become Truxillo's bride, my beauty!" cried the bandit. "Señor Sebastian!" he bawled.

A gaunt priest with an Indian face rose from among the group at the farther end of the table. Truxillo beckoned to him to approach.

And the girl, again half faint from terror, was groping madly for some means of escape. There was a means. She had planned to use it even while she was imprisoned in the fort with Dave and Madero, but her pride forbade her showing it. And she had planned it again for Dave and the lieutenant. Always it had been in the depths of her mind.

She saw the priest approaching. She heard Truxillo shout to him:

"You can marry us now, Father! There is no obstacle, since my wife is not a church wife, as the señorita shall be. Come, bring your book and

the instruments of your office. I drink to—"

"General!" The girl turned to him, beseeching, so lovely in her terror that Truxillo passed his tongue along his lips again. "General, first—your promise!"

"What, the gringo and the lieutenant? Bah, do not trouble your little head about them, my pearl. They shall be released in the morning. Truxillo never breaks his word."

"Set them free first—to-night. Let them depart," pleaded Dolores in a whisper that was almost inaudible. "Your wedding gift to me!"

And if the scheme failed, somewhere she knew she would find the knife that would free her, even if she snatched it from the armory in Truxillo's belt. But it must not fail.

"Let me go to them and tell them that they are free," begged Dolores.

Truxillo scowled for a moment as he remembered that Dave was her lover; then his brows cleared. What difference did that make now? Truxillo was not squeamish.

"Come, my little one, I shall accompany you to the fort, and you shall tell them that they are free!" he shouted pushing back his chair and rising.

Dolores got upon her feet, put up one hand to her aching forehead. "Let me go first," she begged. "Let me say good-by to him alone—to Señor Hatton. He—he loves me—"

Truxillo burst into a roar of laughter and pinched her ear. "Ah, you are like all women, my beauty!" he shouted. "Just now you said that no word of love had ever passed between you, and now he is your lover. *Caramba*, what do I care if the peach is already ripened a little by the sunshine? We go together, my beauty, but you shall enter first and say good-by to this gringo lover of yours. Come then!"

Dolores moved toward the door, and Truxillo strode after her, while his officers, grouped together, followed them with their eyes, a little uneasy for their leader's safety. More than one of them had seen that Dolores was playing a game and had deceived him. Still, none of them was venturesome enough to arouse Truxillo's anger by suggesting that he could be outwitted by a girl.

And the feeling was very vague, and while they conned it in their minds, Dolores and Truxillo had disappeared into the patio, and were moving toward the flight of stairs beside the kitchen.

In the kitchen Rosa Maria was scolding vigorously, while three or four Indian children scoured the pots and pans, and others ran hither and thither aimlessly.

"Ah, it is good, this house!" exclaimed Truxillo. "A good house, not like the dens that I have lived in in the mountains. When Mexico is mine, I shall often return to live here."

Rosa Maria looked up at the sound of the voice, recognized the bandit leader, and, with a parrot-like screech, collapsed upon the floor. Truxillo roared.

"Come, lead the way, little one," he said. "I shall remain here," he added, with faint suspicion, as he saw the flight of stairs running down into the darkness. "Bid *adios* to your lover, and let Truxillo hear the sound of the kiss. I am magnanimous," he shouted tipsily. "I think none the less of a maid for having given her lips before marriage. Bid the two señores come up the stairs and trust Truxillo's word."

Dolores nodded; her heart beat so fast that she could hardly get breath to answer him. Something in that look of hers aroused the man's suspicions. As she started down the stairs, he followed slowly, casting uneasy glances about him, at the shadows playing on the walls above, at the deeper gloom beneath. He saw his own shadow, grossly caricatured by the light that came from above, and started and uttered an oath.

Always Truxillo had been afraid of shadows, a weakness that he had successfully concealed. He saw the menace of death in the play of shadows in his tent, and at night, when the moon cast some unlooked-for reflection on the canvas, he would leap to his feet in a cold sweat of unreasoning terror.

Halfway down the stairs he halted. The guard who was posted there was faintly visible, and Truxillo heard Dolores speaking to him rapidly.

"*Sí, sí,* it is as the señorita tells you! You may go!" he shouted.

The soldier came up the stairs, sidling deferentially past him. Dolores had already taken the key from him and unlocked the door. She was raising the heavy bars.

"Permit me to help you, little one!" called Truxillo, who could now dimly discern the outlines of the great square of age-black oak, barred, and studded with iron.

"No, I have got it open," gasped Dolores; and Truxillo saw the door swing slowly back, and the great vault of gloom within.

"Dave!" called Dolores softly. "Dave, it is I, Dolores! Keep still and make no sound!"

The door closed, and, one by one, Truxillo heard the iron bars, now on the inside, fall into their sockets.

(To be continued in the next issue.)

MEMBERS OF TRAIL'S END

Whose pictures appear on pages 466 and 467

PAGE 466

First Row—*left to right*—Audrey Wisner, York, Penn.; Joe Gerard, Beechwood, W. Va.; A. B. Snyder, Everett, Wash.

Second Row—*left to right*—Joseph Curwood, Brooklyn, N. Y.; Jewel and Sally Stephenson, Henderson, Tex.; George R. Carr, Baker, Minn.

Third Row—*left to right*—Grace Valentine, Reading, Penn.; Joan Dallison, Sheffield, England; Marie Rouch, Lyn, N. Y.

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First Row—*left to right*—Robert C. Roark, Weed, Calif.; Lucy Marie Parse, Waupaca, Wis.; Frank W. Meyer, Ft. Leavenworth, Kans.

Second Row—*left to right*—Edward Kowalski, Erie, Penn.; Mary Kregchen, Lansing, Ohio; Floyd Fetterman, Johnstown, Penn.

Third Row—*left to right*—Erwin H. Shumaker, Columbiana, Ohio; Alice Giesecke, Dallas, Tex.; Florence Hansky, Depew, N. Y.

Trail's End Club

Our Trail's End Club is ever growing and becoming truly a nation-wide organization. More and more members are joining our ranks, and many of them writing in to tell us about the friends they've made and the enjoyment they've had through Trail's End. So whenever we meet up with a fellow member, let us always hold out a welcoming hand and remember that here is a friend in spirit.

There is one thing that we'd like to bring to the attention of you members, and that is the matter of photographs to be printed in the magazine. When you send us pictures will you please try to have them as clear as possible? You see, if they are blurred they print very badly in the magazine and you may have a hard time recognizing your own picture. We want to have them as good as possible so that you and your friends may enjoy them. So remember—nice, clear snapshots.

The coupon for Trail's End Club stationery is on page 394 of this issue. Fill out the coupon and send it in with the money for the amount of this writing paper you desire.

66

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.

I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

Signed (*Miss*) (*Mrs.*) (*Mr.*) .....

Address .....

Three *successive* coupons make you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.

Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.

You must be a member to secure the pin.

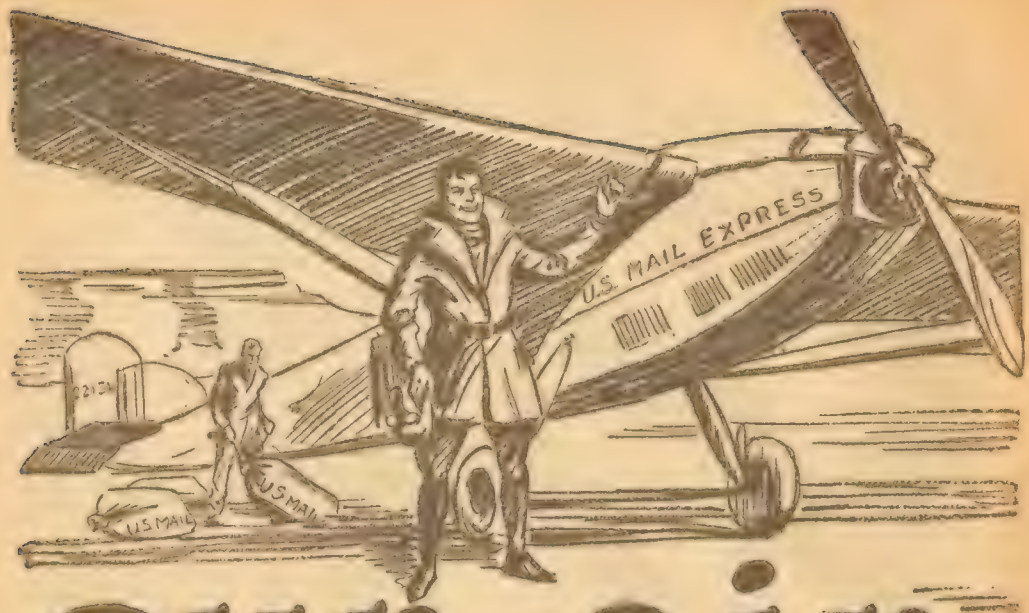
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

Some Fellow Members

The names of these members appear on page 464.

The names of these members appear on page 464.

See Page 465.



our air

OUR AIR MAIL is running daily between the editorial office of RANCH ROMANCES and its readers throughout the world. The Editor wishes to establish a definite understanding with every reader and be in a position to know what you want and why. RANCH ROMANCES is not published for anyone but the reader, and we want you to look upon this magazine as something distinctly your own. Take a personal interest in its future. Write and tell us exactly the kind of story that you think ought to go into it. And we want to help make friends for our readers. We want to help you to know friends who are thousands of miles away or within a stone's throw of your own town. OUR AIR MAIL will be glad to forward and exchange letters. The Editor reserves the right to read and turn over to the Postal Authorities, if necessary, anything that is not in keeping with the clean, outdoor spirit of RANCH ROMANCES. Be sure to enclose postage for letters sent by OUR AIR MAIL.

HE WANTS TO BE A FARMER

Dear Editor:

Three times have I tried to get a letter into Our Air Mail without success. If my fourth attempt fails, I'll throw my writing material away, and resign myself to disappointment.

I am a constant reader of Ranch Romances and surely do like the clean, fine stories which talk of the great outdoors. But that is not all I want to tell you. I have a little plea I want to put over.

I want people to write to me—people who live in the backwoods. I would rather be a farmer, rancher, or forester in the backwoods than a banker in Chicago with all his money and worry. It will be some time before I can be a farmer or rancher, as I have been an orphan since I was nine years old, and have no home. I will be very satisfied if I can find a job as a ranch or farmhand. I am thirty-two and in the army now.

I will answer all letters I receive from rural people, and send a snap too.

Cheerio,

"JOE."

c/o Our Air Mail.

"SHORTY SCOTCH"

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances only a few months. So far I think it is a good Western story magazine. I haven't read a story in it that anyone could object to. I take great pleasure in reading the letters in Our Air Mail. Now I am going to break through the gates. I may not succeed this first time, but I will keep trying until I do.

I don't suppose there have been very many men as old as I am who have tried to get a letter published in Our Air Mail. I am not too old to read and write letters, and that is my main hobby. Am an ex-cowpoke and have had a little experience on cattle ranches, wheat ranches, and in farming. Anyone is welcome to write to me from any place in the world. I extend a special invitation to any single lady or widow who is past thirty.

"SHORTY SCOTCH."

c/o Our Air Mail.

ALICE IS FRIENDLY

Dear Editor:

Ranch Romances has been one of the most interesting magazines included in my reading list, and I've often envied those lucky enough to get a letter printed in Our Air Mail. Somehow, I have never been able to command enough nerve to try to have a letter of my own admitted into the charmed circle.

Now that I've made the break, I'm taking all the jumps. In addition to making this plea for pen pals, I'm enclosing the necessary three coupons to make me a member of Trail's End, and also a picture to be included among the others on the two pages dedicated to new members of the club.

I have gray-green eyes, coppery, red-gold hair and the old ivory complexion which sometimes accompanies red hair, but without the freckles. I am twenty-five years old. Really and truly, folks, I'm a friendly sort of person, and would like to hear from anyone; will exchange snapshots with those caring to do so, and will answer all letters.

In closing, I wish to thank Ranch Romances for Our Air Mail, as I think it is performing a wonderful service to those of us who are interested in other people and other places, by bringing us together through the medium of the postal routes.

Hopefully awaiting your approval, I am

ALICE M. COLLINER.

4107 West Washington St.,
Indianapolis, Ind.

THREE CHEERS FOR R. R.

Dear Editor:

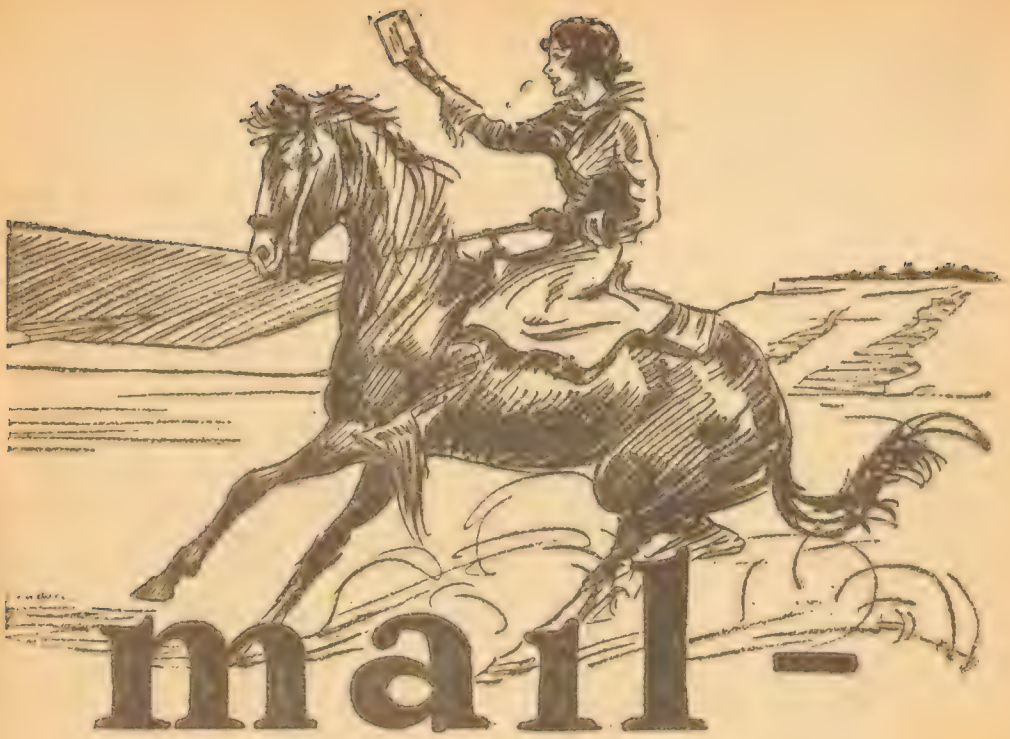
May I break into Our Air Mail? I have tried before, but I've had no success so far. So here's hoping for luck. I guarantee to answer all letters as soon as I receive them.

I have brown hair and blue-gray eyes. Come on, sailors, cowboys, and just anybody, as I want a lot of pen pals to write to a lonely girl.

Three cheers for the R. R. and its great success.

MARGARET.

Margaret Kimball,
East Falls Church, Va.



R. R. IS THE BEST

Dear Editor:

Another plea for pen pals! Hope you will be so kind as to publish this for me, and that results will soon be forthcoming.

I am a young man of twenty-four winters, foot-loose and fancy-free. Have brown curly hair, blue eyes, and fair complexion. Now, boys, I am expecting some letters pronto. I don't mean maybe when I say I'll answer them, one and all. Don't disappoint me.

Thanks, Editor, for publishing this. The R. R. is the best mag on the newsstands.

Sincerely yours,
ALONZO B. RYALS.

Route 2, Box 49,
Roseburg, Ore.

ALL ARE WELCOME

Dear Editor:

Won't you give a lonely girl just a little room in Our Air Mail? My main aim is to get some pen pals from far and near. All are welcome to write.

I'm a blonde with blue eyes, fair complexion, and am nineteen years old. Am willing to exchange snapshots. So if you have any, send them along, and I promise to send one in return. Am interested in all kinds of sports. Now come on, all of you, help fill the mail box that belongs to

"MITCHIE."

Kathryn Rachmer,
Middle River P. O.,
c/o Mrs. W. Weatherstine,
Baltimore, Md.

GLORIA NEEDS FRIENDS

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of Ranch Romances for four years. I am a blonde, nineteen years old, with blue eyes. I haven't very many friends, as I have only been in Chicago a short time. I would like very much to hear from aviators or anybody else from the ages of twenty-five to thirty. I am interested in all sports.

GLORIA WINDEMERE.

1422 So. Kedvale Ave.,
Chicago, Ill.

TAKE PITY ON HELEN

Dear Editor:

Won't you please be real kind to a lonesome miss from Cleveland, Ohio, and put her little plea in your wonderful magazine? I am rather lonesome at present, but being twenty and still full of life, I hope to get over being lonesome, as soon as some kind readers take pity on me. Won't everybody please do?

I shall make my letters very interesting. I truly promise that. So come on, pals, write to

HELEN.

c/o Our Air Mail.

A BIG ORDER

Dear Editor:

I am eighteen years of age; have wavy, blond hair, blue eyes and a fair complexion. Writing letters is my weakness; next to that come all sports, dancing and reading. So come on, all you sailors, soldiers, marines, National Guardsmen, aviators, or what have you? Shower me with letters. I promise to answer every letter, and also will exchange snaps.

Wishing the R. R. the best of luck, I remain

"BABE."

Phyllis Black,
Route 2,
W. Riverside, Calif.

A COUPLE OF EX-RANCHERS

Dear Editor:

We are two lonesome mavericks from California, and we want pen pals. We have tried many, many times to break into your magazine. We have even tried not buying them, expecting you to go out of business; but all to no avail. We always come back for more.

Please, dear Editor, won't you give us a break and get us some pen pals? We are both ex-ranchers, having been born and raised on a ranch in Arizona. We will sign off now, but will watch your mag like chicken hawks a pullet.

BOB AND JACK CROCKETT.

1419 E. California Ave.,
Glendale, Calif.

TRAVELING BUDDIES

Dear Editor:

We have been constant readers of R. R. for a number of years, and find your magazine a lot of pleasure during our lonesome hours. We watch Our Air Mail with each new edition to see if any of our letters have been published, but so far have not been so fortunate.

We have been buddies for about fifteen years, and during that time have covered every state in the Union and thirteen foreign countries. Naturally, we want to tell somebody about some of our experiences. We want pen pals from everywhere, and promise faithfully to answer all letters.

Now for descriptions. We are both twenty-three years of age. We have black hair and brown eyes. We can answer any questions asked about any state or country. Give us a trial, pen pals, and we'll tell you our favorite hobbies and pastimes while in the army.

Hoping to see the mail man lame from so much mail, we are

"HAPPY" AND JOE.

"Happy" Martin,
Joe Woods,
c/o Station Hospital,
Ft. Sill, Okla.

FILL HER MAIL BOX

Dear Editor:

I am anxious to have pen pals from all parts of the world, especially from foreign countries, to write me, as I have loads of spare time to write. I am a young married woman, twenty-four years old, and would like to hear from young and old ladies.

Come on, pen pals, fill my mail box with letters.

MRS. WM. H. DENNY.

326 Eicher Ave.,
Greensburg, Pa.

GIRLS, WRITE!

Dear Editor:

This is my second letter, and I hope you can find room for it in Our Air Mail. I would like to get some pen pals (girls preferred) as I am awfully lonely and never get many letters.

Sincerely,

E. BISHOP.

Frazer Mills P. O.,
B. C., Canada.

TWO CITY GIRLS

Dear Editor:

Like most city girls, we love ranches. But the nearest we've ever been to one is in R. R. Maybe you can find some pen pals for us who will help us forget the monotonous city. Of course we aren't the pessimistic, grouchy, blue type; but doesn't everyone get that "what's-the-use" feeling once in a while?

Thelma is a good dancer, who loves to play solitaire. She has auburn hair and blue-gray eyes. Prefers gentlemanly brunettes, but not tin gods. Marga loves music and studies art. She is horribly impractical, reads everything, has green-brown eyes and dark brown hair. She prefers tall dark men, not over twenty-five.

Yours truly,

THELMA AND MARGA.

c/o Our Air Mail.

CREATE FRIENDSHIP

Dear Editor:

I would like to hear from pen pals anywhere outside of this town. Friendship, you know, is created by common interests and services rendered. My interests are hiking, camping, collecting stamps and views of other places. If you pen pals do not have these common interests, you can still create a friendship by rendering me the service of writing a letter.

I am seventeen years of age; have dark brown hair and dark blue eyes. I am graduating this year, and that will leave me a lot of time to answer your letters. I want to hear from anybody, anywhere, and promise to answer all letters. I will also exchange snapshots.

Sincerely,

VICTOR FRANC.

90—15th St.,
Ambridge, Pa.

SHE LIKES FUN

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to get into Our Air Mail, so won't you please print this for me? I am twenty-one years old, have brownish gray eyes and brown wavy hair. I am a school teacher; not the old-maidish type, but always ready for good times. I love all sports. So anyone interested in them, please write. I will try to answer all letters I receive.

Here's hoping my mail box is overflowing with letters from young and old.

Sincerely,

"BONNIE."

c/o Our Air Mail.

HE SURE HAS TRAVELED

Dear Editor:

First of all, let me tell you that I am twenty-one years old; have read magazines since I was twelve, and haven't found one that could compete with that way of ours. Have lived here in sunny California for twelve years, although the last six of them I've traveled all over North and South America, Cuba, Haiti, and the Hawaiian Islands.

If there is anyone who would care to write, or if there is anyone who would like to have me tell him or her about these countries I've visited, just drop me a line. Now come on, boys and girls, let's have about two hundred letters. Will answer every one of them.

Here's wishing the magazine all the success in the world.

Sincerely,

CLYDE A. GARDNER.

General Delivery,
Sunland, Calif.

HE'S RARING TO GO

Dear Editor:

I've come to the conclusion that persistency is necessary to cram into your overcrowded section of Our Air Mail. So here I am again trusting that I will succeed this time.

I want pen pals, Editor; in fact, if you only knew how much, you'd publish this plea right away. I am eighteen years young, not so bad-looking; have brown eyes and hair and a great failing for Uncle Sam's gals. I'll send my picture to all who send me theirs. Writing letters is my main pastime; also music, aviation and motorcycling.

I want you all to write and try me out, especially the girls out West; but all letters are welcome, and will be answered as they arrive. Now don't forget. I am well supplied with writing material and am just raring to go.

Trusting that my request will bring most satisfactory results, I remain

A Ranch Romances booster,

"BABE."

Frank H. Reilly,
Rose St., No. 1,
Boural, New So. Wales,
Australia.

"CURLY" OF CALIFORNIA

Dear Editor:

I have written to some pals, but I haven't received one answer. Now please, dear Editor, print my letter so that someone may write to me. I'm nearly twenty, have black curly hair and brown eyes. Will answer every letter. So come on, pals, write to me.

Wishing R. R. continued success, I am

"CURLY" OF CALIFORNIA.

Josephine Bruno,
758 Cutter St.,
Pittsburg, Calif.

THE GATE IS CRASHED

Dear Editor:

This is my second attempt to crash into Our Air Mail, so please print this letter, as I would like to get a few pen pals. I would like to hear from anybody, anywhere, and will exchange pictures with anyone.

Come on, you R. R. fans, drop me a few lines. I promise to answer all letters. Why, I almost forgot. I am seventeen years old, have dark brown hair, gray eyes, and love all outdoor sports.

Three cheers for R. R. and its success.

WALTER FANTINO.

156 Lafayette St.,
Torrington, Conn.

COWGIRLS, GET BUSY!

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Ranch Romances for about three years and sure do think it is the best magazine printed. My husband and I both enjoy the stories and hope some day to go West.

I would love to hear from pen pals, cowgirls especially. I have brown hair, blue eyes, and am married. But don't let that stop you from writing. I sure hope to hear from someone real soon.

Sincerely,

ALICE.

c/o Our Air Mail.

"MARGIE" IS HOPEFUL

Dear Editor:

I'm surely hoping this letter won't be written in vain, because I want just oodles of pen pals, male and female, from most everywhere. I am a girl of eighteen with brown hair and hazel eyes. I am fond of dancing and reading. Since I live only two blocks from the ocean, I spend quite a lot of time on the beach and in swimming.

Come one, come all, fill my mail box soon.

Hopefully,

"MARGIE."

Marjorie Baker,
152 Roycroft Ave.,
Long Beach, Calif.

LADY OF FORTUNE

Dear Editor:

Several centuries ago, I would have dressed in boys' clothes and been a wandering minstrel, earning a bite of supper and a night's lodging by my songs, tales of adventure, and the haunting melody of my guitar. But to-day the world is more prosaic. The songs I sing are blue-songs; my stories are tinged with modern slang, and I strum a banjo.

However, I do own the curse of the vagabonds, which eternally rebels against the monotony of modern life. So, dear Editor, won't you please publish this little plea for pen pals from over the world? I promise to repay their kind hospitality with a bit of glamor and dreams.

To get down to facts, I'm seventeen, considered attractive, and give an impression of brownness. I like to sing, sketch and strum, but am chiefly inclined to writing plays, stories and letters. And now, let me add to the unending saga of praise for Clayton magazines with my very best wishes.

LADY OF FORTUNE.

c/o Our Air Mail.

A LONESOME TARHEEL

Dear Editor:

I am a lonesome Tarheel, and from my address you can see I am a little distance from my home. However, being a regular reader of the best magazine on the market today, Ranch Romances, I am writing to you in the hope that you will understand my lonesomeness, and print this letter in Our Air Mail.

As I have noticed that the readers of Ranch Romances generally give a brief description, I will do the same. I have a head of

rusty hair, set off by eyes to match. I like sports of all kinds, including the game of bridge. I surely like to write; so won't some, or rather all, of you readers of R. R. drop a line to me? I guarantee an answer to each and every one.

I am in Uncle Sam's Air Corps and can give answers to all questions concerning aviation in the army. Come, one and all, make a Tarheel happy, even though he is in sunny California.

Wishing continued popularity and success to Ranch Romances, I am

ROBERT ALCORN.

77th Pursuit Sqdn., A. C.,
Mather Field, Calif.

ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

Dear Editor:

As a regular reader of your fine magazine and an admirer of your enthralling stories, I should be more than thankful if you would put me in communication with some readers on your side of the Atlantic, as I desire a pen companion with some mutual interests.

Thanking you in anticipation, I remain

Yours truly,

GEORGE EDWARD MITCHELL.

27 Collier Row Lane,
Romford, Essex, England.

THREE ENGINEERS

Dear Editor:

We are three engineers, coming to you with tears in our eyes, beseeching you to get us some friends, even though they be pen and ink friends, before we die of homesickness. Our hearts are breaking with loneliness; no one cares for us. Please, dear Editor, put this letter in the Air Mail soon, or all will be too late; we'll have jumped off a bridge, or taken some other cure for broken hearts.

We're a close three-man organization, and it's a hard day when the three of us can't scrape enough money to buy a copy of Ranch Romances. We've written to several people who have been fortunate enough to break into print, but without much success. So we're putting it up to you.

We're just a couple of dashes and a dot; two of us are tall, and one short. Our three ages are nineteen, twenty, and twenty-two. We're all brunettes; we hail from Oklahoma, Ohio, and Cuba, and we're all privates. We're not telling which is which, just now.

We're members of a topographic company of engineers; that is to say, we do surveying for our twenty-one dollars per month. Recently, we were working on the Mexican border in Texas; now we're on a map of Long Island.

All right, people, we want letters from anybody, anywhere, any age or sex. Answer 'em? Of course we will!

HENRY S. HOPKINS,
OWEN M. SOMERFORD,
JAMES P. FORRESTER,

29th Engineers,
Mitchell Field,
New York.

"JOAN" IS PERSISTENT

Dear Editor:

Won't you please take notice of my persistency and allow me to break into Our Air Mail? I have dark brown hair, blue eyes, and am seventeen. My hobbies are hunting and fishing; in fact, I enjoy any type of outdoor sport, and it is probably due to this that I have a preference for Ranch Romances. I am not lonesome, but I love to receive and write letters. I enjoy making friends and our apartment is seldom without some of my friends about.

Will anyone and everyone write to me? Of course I will answer everyone and will exchange snapshots with all. Please write. My nickname is

"JOAN."

c/o Our Air Mail.

SHE LOVES THE WEST

Dear Editor:

I have read Ranch Romances ever since I started reading magazines, and I have never found one story in all that time that I did not like. You certainly have a wonderful magazine. One of the best, I would say.

I wonder if there would be room in Our Air Mail for me, even if I do live in New York State? I suppose that is far from the West, but there are lots of us in the East who love your Western stories, too. I hope that that will not be held against me when some of your people see this letter in print.

I will tell you a little about myself. I am twenty-three years old, have medium brown wavy hair, and am not bad-looking. At least, that is what I am told.

Won't you try to print this letter and help me get some pen pals?

Very truly yours,

DOROTHY.

c/o Our Air Mail.

SCOTLAND CALLING

Dear Editor:

Any of my fellow readers interested in Scotland? If so, write me. Pen friends are unknown over here, and it seems such a jolly idea, I thought I'd like to try my hand at it. Now who's going to help me to sample the delights of pen friends?

Oh, I forgot! You want to know something about me. Well no one can really describe one's self; suffice to state that I have brown hair, gray eyes, am twenty-one years old and— Well, write and find out. I am interested in anything that's interesting, and anyone who's interesting. Write me and I'll tell you all you want to know about Scotland.

Wishing your magazine continued success, I am

A canny Scot,

BRICE SWEET.

60 Calder St.,
Glasgow, S. 2,
Scotland.

CHEERIO!

Dear Editor:

We, the jury, have tried Ranch Romances for a period of three or four years, and our verdict is: Never have we seen any magazine that has repeatedly doubled in its interest, size or quality. Therefore, we now sentence it to many, many more years of complete satisfaction.

Now, dear Editor, will you kindly tell the boys and girls to show me that Oklahoma is not forgotten in this old world, by writing me gobs and gobs of letters from all over the U. S., England, Australia, Africa, China, and just anywhere they may happen to be at present? I certainly hope you will believe me when I say that an Oklahoman's word is good, when he says he will answer promptly each and every letter received. Do I get them, or not?

Just for your curiosity, I am twenty-two years of age, have wavy brown hair and brown eyes. I am brimming over with fun, and for a fact, am quite ambitious.

Cheerio,

"SHAG" ELMER KNOWLES.

2 South Main St.,
Sand Springs, Okla.

AN URGENT PLEA

Dear Editor:

This is my third attempt to get some pen pals. Now please give me a break this time, and print my most urgent plea. I think the Double R is the very best magazine of its kind on the market. I have been its regular fan for over three years.

I'm just a lonesome girl. I have black hair, dark gray eyes, and like dancing, tennis, golf and hiking. My friends say I have a keen sense of humor. Now, you ink-slingers, give me a chance to page you, as writing is my hobby. Letter-writing especially is my long suit.

Wishing the Double R worlds of success, I am

Sincerely,

"FRENCHIE."

Verona R. Bartrow,
General Delivery,
Bend, Ore.

R. R. IS A TONIC

Dear Editor:

Again I am writing for admittance to Our Air Mail, and I sincerely hope that you do not fail me this time. I am twenty-four years old, have light brown hair and eyes, and a fair complexion. I have been all over the United States; am a college graduate and a member of the fraternity Sigma Chi. Am a lover of all outdoor sports, especially football and golf.

I am a constant reader of Ranch Romances and consider it a great tonic for the blues and what ails you. I do get lonesome between times, and would love to get some letters from readers of your excellent magazine who can appreciate a clean-minded, sincere fellow who can write an interesting letter and will exchange snapshots.

Thanking you in advance for the privilege of joining Our Air Mail, I only regret that Ranch Romances does not appear weekly instead of twice a month.

Faithfully yours,

WALTER CHAMBERS ESMOND.

417 East Main St.,
New Iberia, La.

A UNIVERSITY STUDENT

Dear Editor:

As I have been a faithful reader of Ranch Romances for years, I think I deserve a place in your Air Mail column. I am a student in the University of Oklahoma, and while I have read a great deal I have never found anything that equals it in human interest and literary value. I read with interest the letters in your column, and would like very much to correspond with some of your contributors, particularly those who are students of other universities. Letters from any young ladies will be especially welcome.

As for myself, I am twenty years of age, brunette with blue eyes, and am a member of Delta Beta Rho. I am interested in all romances, and nearly all phases of Western life.

Hoping to make some good friends and correspondents, I beg to remain

Sincerely,

SIDNEY P. McGEE.

464 College Ave.,
Norman, Okla.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

BY PROFESSOR MARCUS MARI

JULY

LEO

LEO governs after July 22nd. These people are jovial in manner, just in their dealings with others, and have great contempt for mean and sordid actions.

They are extremists in everything they do, quick in their sympathies, extravagant in their generosities, and when wronged or imposed upon, furious and vindictive. Their natural tendency is to mete out measure for measure—there is no more faithful, loyal and affectionate nature than the Leo type, and there are few whose enmity is so bitter and lasting.

They possess remarkable intuition, and so keenly alive to others' moods are they that they seem at times to read the thoughts of others. They adapt themselves so readily to other people that they are frequently believed insincere and accused of acting. But it is their ability to put themselves in the other fellow's place which makes them seem so contradictory in their speech and conduct.

Leo people desire to command, to lead, and expect obedience and deference from others They are so impulsive, so impatient of restraint, of convention and red tape, that others, admiring their whirlwind course, blindly follow their lead.

These people should seek mates in Aquarius, or Sagittarius. They will find congenial friends and business associates in Cancer and Virgo.

Professor Mari will give a personal reading to any reader who wishes to fill out the coupon.

Name..... Sex.....

Address .....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date.....

Always use this coupon and enclose stamped envelope. 7-31-31

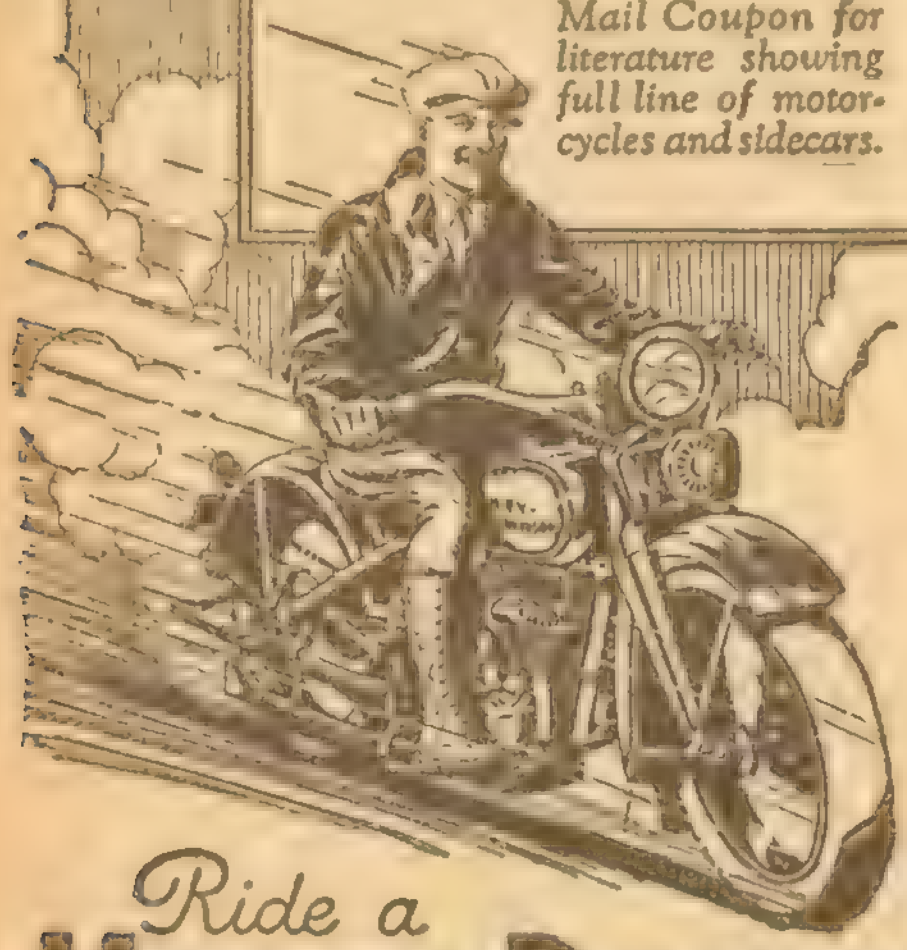
"BANK — and Give 'er the Gun!"

SWEEP around a curve, your mount answering every sway of your body—straighten out and flash down the straightaway, your motor purring, and the keen wind fanning your face!

That's motorcycling, with a 1931 Harley-Davidson — the sport that has the thrills of flying, without its risks.

Try a ride on a new Harley-Davidson. Your nearby dealer will gladly take you out — and teach you in 5 minutes if you're not a rider already. . . . Ask him about his Pay-As-You-Ride Plan that makes buying so easy.

Mail Coupon for literature showing full line of motorcycles and sidecars.



Ride a HARLEY-DAVIDSON

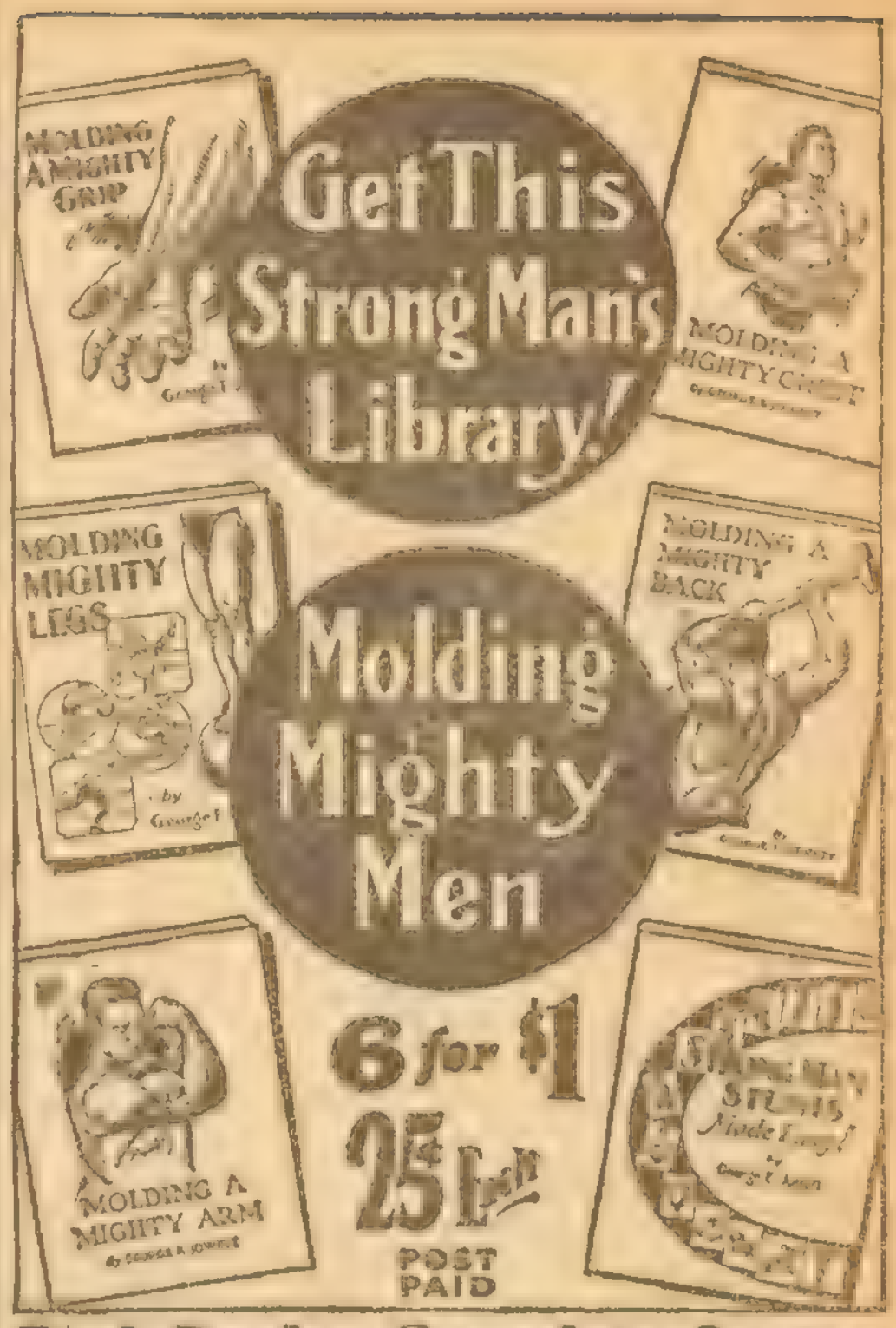
MAIL THE COUPON

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTOR COMPANY
Dept. NSG., Milwaukee, Wis.
Interested in your motorcycles. Send literature.

Name.....

Address.....

My age is ( ) 16-19 years, ( ) 20-30 years, ( ) 31 years and up, ( ) under 16 years. Check your age group.



Each Book a Complete Course

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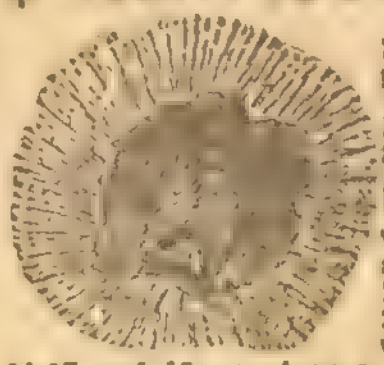

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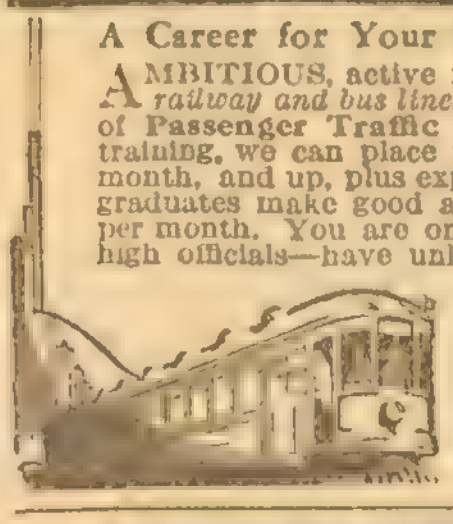

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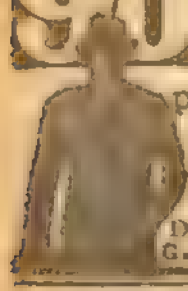

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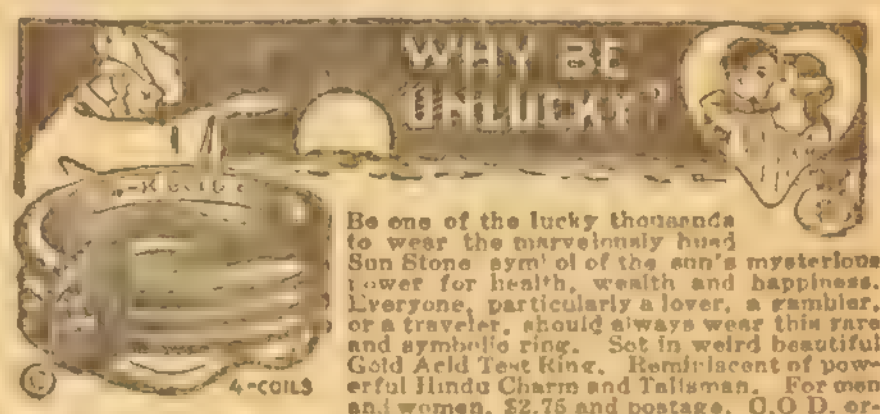

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Thousands of men and women past 40, and many far younger, who feel run-down and suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Stiffness, Leg Pains, Nervousness or Burning, caused by excess Kidney Acidity or functional Bladder Irritation, should use Cystex (pronounced Siss-tex) specially prepared for these troubles. Works fast. Starts circulating thru system in 15 Minutes. Only 60c at druggists. Guaranteed to satisfy completely or return empty package and get your money back.

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Many people with defective hearing and Head Noises enjoy conversation, go to Theatre and Church because they use Leonard Invisible Ear Drums which resemble Tiny Megaphones fitting in the Ear entirely out of sight. No wires, batteries or head piece. They are inexpensive. Write for booklet and sworn statement of the inventor who was himself deaf.

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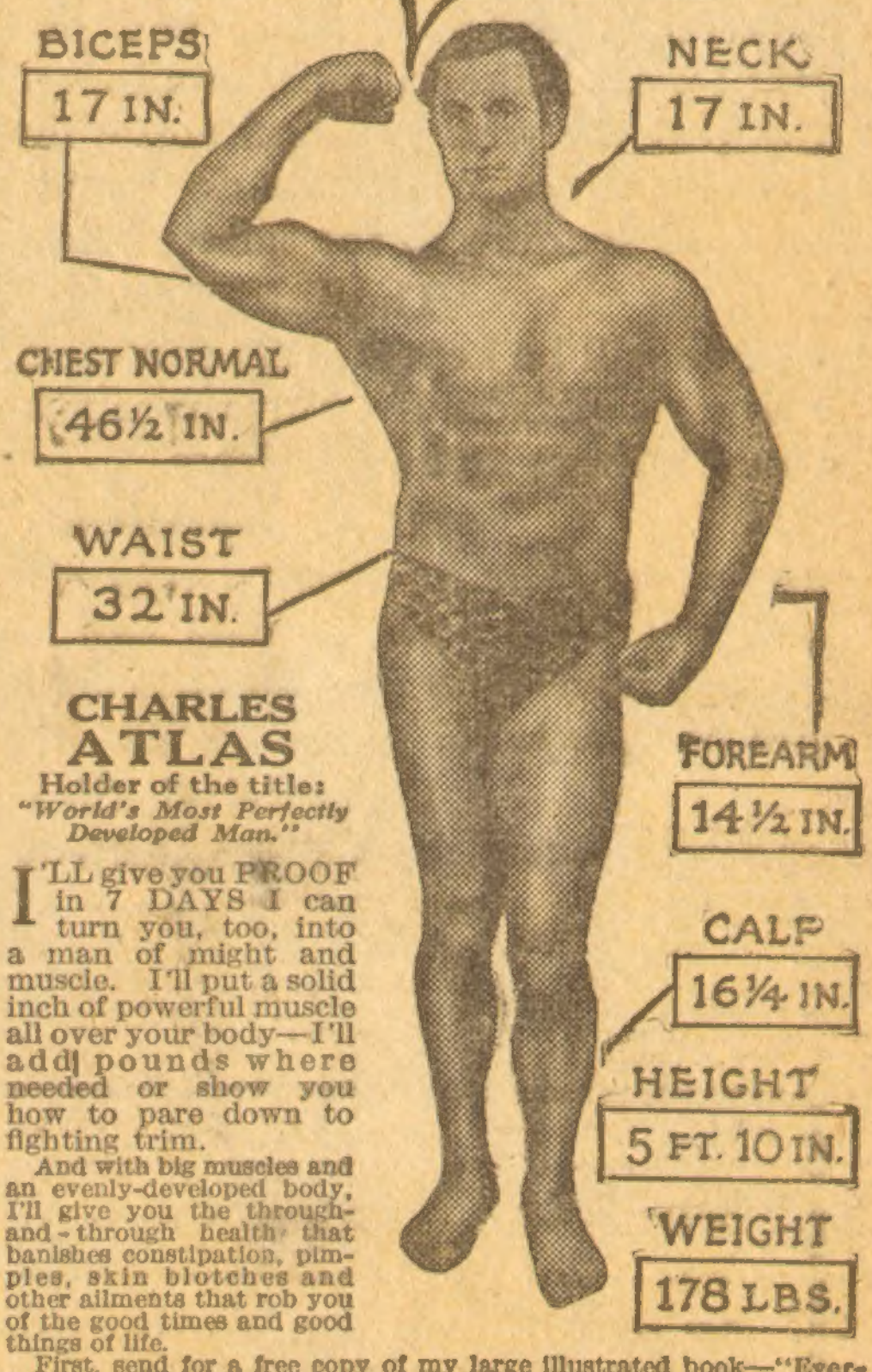

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I'LL give you PROOF in 7 DAYS I can turn you, too, into a man of might and muscle. I'll put a solid inch of powerful muscle all over your body—I'll add pounds where needed or show you how to pare down to fighting trim.

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First, send for a free copy of my large illustrated book—"**Everlasting Health and Strength.**" Then let me prove—in only 7 days—what my secret of **Dynamic-Tension** will do for YOU—in your own home—spending 15 minutes a day doing what I tell you—without apparatus—without special foods, pills, or baths—without any fussy contrivances.

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I want proof **Dynamic-Tension** will give me, too, a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send free book "**Everlasting Health and Strength.**"

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City and State.....

A Personal Message from the Publisher

Friend Reader:

Frankly, I am curious.

I have reason to believe that my magazines have the highest class, the most responsible, the most loyal body of Readers of any group of fiction magazines in the world. I want to find out if this is so. The information would be very valuable to me, and in order to find out I am going to ask you, as a friend, to give me your help.

I do feel that you are my friends; I like to think of you as that; I like to call you that. By the very nature of the publishing business I, in general, know your tastes and preferences, and am in sympathy with them. But I would like to know you in a more personal, more intimate way—to know the real *you* who buy and enjoy my magazines. It is not likely that I can do this in person, so will you do the next best thing, and meet me half way by filling out and sending in the questionnaire below?

The information, so far as any individual is concerned, of course will be kept strictly confidential. No one but myself will know anything about *you* personally; only the tabulated information in total form will be shown to my editors and advertisers.

As an appreciation of your friendship, I will send to everyone answering these questions a copy of my famous "Secrets of the Secret Service"—a big, thrilling book of inside stuff about Uncle Sam's secret police, of which over 100,000 copies have been sold throughout the United States—and I will send it to you free and postpaid.

Don't delay! Sit down now. A fair swap between friends—and my sincere thanks for your courtesy and loyaltv.

W. M. Clayton

Publisher.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Age ..... Male or Female .....

Married? ..... Head of a Family? .....

Occupation or Business? ..... Do you Own Your Own Home? .....

Do you Own a Car? ..... What Make? .....

Do you Own a Radio? ..... What Make? .....

What college, if any, did you attend? .....

Of what clubs or societies are you a member? .....

What kind of stories do you like best? .....

How many others, besides yourself, read your copy of this magazine? .....

What other magazines do you read regularly? .....

Thank you for this information. Remember it will be kept strictly confidential. Kindly mail this information to me at my office, 80 Lafayette Street, New York City.

W. M. Clayton, Publisher.

L

Bills! Bills! Bills!

Here's the money to Pay them

I'll give you

A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE

$72.00 a week

Would $72 a week take away your worry about bills? Would $10, $12, $15 a day smooth the way for you? Then listen to me, my friend. I have something of importance to say to you. I know of hundreds of men and women who were once in the same position you may be in today—men out of a job—widows with children to support—honest, conscientious people who needed more money to keep things going. Did they give up? Not on your life! I'll tell you what they did. They accepted a wonderful opportunity to make money—more money than they ever made in their lives before—the very same offer I'm ready to make to *you* right now.

Bills All Paid—And Money in the Bank

H. T. Lester, of Massachusetts, is one of them. And this is what he writes me: "My bank book shows that *in 25 days* I deposited $100.35—that is, *over and above my living expenses.*" Think of it! *Bills all paid* and *over $100 clear cash* in the bank in less than a month. Mrs. Edgar Crouthamel, of Pennsylvania, is another. She got $89.72 for one week's work. And then there is G. W. Tubbs, of California. He was out of a job for three months. But he accepted my offer and now often makes as much as $20 in one day. Are these people worrying about bills? And I could mention hundreds of others just like them to show you the amazing possibilities of my proposition.

You Don't Need Capital or Experience

Is there any reason why *you* can't do as well? Let me tell you why I think you can. I do business in every section of the country. I need people everywhere to help me. And I have a place for *you* right now in your very locality. You don't have to invest any capital. You don't need any special training or experience. Mrs. Frank Young, Minnesota, was formerly an office worker, making $50 a month. Now, she is a widow with two children. Yet, with my proposition she often makes as much as $25 in a single day. Henry W. Yeager, of Minnesota, didn't have any experience either. But he had bills to pay and needed money. With the opportunity I gave him he made a profit of $17 one Saturday afternoon.

Korenblit Makes $110 a Week

I'll tell you, as I told them, the few simple things you need to do. I'll furnish everything you need to have. And you'll be your own boss—work when you please. You couldn't imagine finer, more delightful work that pays such big money for the time you devote.

Maybe a few extra dollars a week would help you. I'll be surprised if you don't make $25 to $35 a week in spare time. L. R. Solomon, Pennsylvania, cleared $29 in four hours. Or, maybe you'd like steady, year-round work, with a chance to have an income of $72 a week. Sol Korenblit, New York, does better than that. He says he averages $110 a week regularly. Whatever you want, here's your opportunity to get it.

Send No Money—Just Mail Coupon

Let's stop worrying about bills. Let's get them paid—*quick*. Then, let's get money ahead; have the things you need and want; enjoy life. I'm ready to give you the chance. I'm ready to make you the very same offer that has brought $15 and more in a day to literally thousands of people. You don't need to wait for anything. You can start making money right away. I don't care who you are or where you live, it's worth your while to find out about this amazing offer. Mail the coupon and I'll give you facts that will open your eyes. And you don't obligate yourself or risk one penny. You have everything to gain. So don't wait. Mail the coupon—NOW.

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Yes, I'd like to know all about your plan that offers me a chance to pay my bills and make $72 a week—starting at once. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name.....

Address.....

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Sunshine Mellows Heat Purifies

LUCKIES are always kind to your throat

Everyone knows that sunshine mellows—that's why the "TOASTING" process includes the use of the Ultra Violet Rays. LUCKY STRIKE—made of the finest tobaccos—the Cream of the Crop—THEN—"IT'S TOASTED"—an extra, secret heating process. Harsh irritants present in all raw tobaccos are expelled by "TOASTING." These irritants are sold to others. They are not present in your LUCKY STRIKE. No wonder LUCKIES are always kind to your throat.

The advice of your physician is: Keep out of doors, in the open air, breathe deeply; take plenty of exercise in the mellow sunshine, and have a periodic check-up on the health of your body.

"It's toasted"

Your Throat Protection—

against irritation—against cough.

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